



How social care staff can support people with learning disabilities to look after their eyes, teeth and ears

Health in people with learning disabilities



People with learning disabilities have poorer health than other people and die younger.

There are certain health checks that everyone should have regularly to look after themselves.

Social care staff should support people to look after themselves and have the regular checks they need to stay in good health.

Looking after eyes



Adults with learning disabilities are ten times more likely to have serious sight problems than other people. People with learning disabilities may not be able to say if they have problems with their eyes and vision.

Regular eye tests are important because your eyes don't usually hurt when something is wrong. An eye test with an optometrist is the best way to check how well someone can see and that their eyes are healthy. This should happen at least every two years.

You don't have to be able to read or talk to have an eye test.

There is a [map](#)¹ to help you find optometrists who have shared information on their services for people with learning disabilities and how they can support them.

An eye test can pick up early signs of eye conditions before someone is aware of any symptoms. Other conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure are also often first diagnosed by eye tests. Most eye conditions can be treated if found early enough.



SeeAbility supports people with sight loss and other disabilities. It provides lots of information for supporters and also [easy-read resources](#).²

There is a Public Health England [report](#)³ with examples of how eye care can be done well and links to resources about eye care services.

Looking after teeth



Brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, and flossing at least once a day, helps keep teeth and gums healthy. Some people with learning disabilities will need help with both brushing and flossing.

Avoiding too many sugary drinks and snacks will also help someone to have healthy teeth.



People with learning disabilities are more likely to have tooth decay, loose teeth, gum disease and other problems with their teeth and mouth. They are less likely than other people to visit their dentist.

Speak to the person's dentist about how often they need to have check-ups. This will depend on how healthy their teeth and gums are. Dental hygienists can also help teach how to keep teeth clean and gums healthy.

Some people may need reasonable adjustments to help them access dental services. There is a Public Health England [report](#)⁴ with examples of how this can be done and links to resources about dentistry services.

Looking after ears



People with learning disabilities are more likely to need a hearing aid, but many have never had a hearing test. They may not be aware they have problems hearing or they may not be able to tell someone this. People supporting them need to look out for signs of hearing difficulties.

Some people with learning disabilities will have problems having a routine hearing assessment but there are reasonable adjustments that can be made to [help](#).⁵



Some causes of hearing loss can be treated with medication or minor surgery. It is quite common for people with learning disabilities to have problems with earwax and this can cause hearing loss. Earwax build-up can be removed by olive oil drops, syringing or suction. This can usually be done at the GP surgery.

Some people who have hearing loss may need a hearing aid. Most people with learning disabilities can cope with a hearing aid. Hearing problems can be particularly difficult for people who already have poor communication skills so it is important to get treatment.

Easy-read resources



Use websites like [Easyhealth](#)⁶, [A Picture of Health](#)⁷ and [BILD](#)⁸ to find easy-read information and videos about taking good care of eyes, teeth and ears.

Key messages:

- it is important that social care staff support people with learning disabilities to have regular health checks
- there are reasonable adjustments that can be made to help people with learning disabilities have their sight, teeth and hearing checked
- there is lots of easy-read information available about looking after eyes, teeth and ears

This is the fifth in a series of health factsheets for social care staff. You can find others and more [guidance](#) for social care providers.

There is a [supporting set of slides](#) for this document that can be used by social care staff as a training resource.

The pictures in this factsheet are from Photosymbols: www.photosymbols.co.uk

First published: October 2017

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PHE supports the UN
Sustainable Development Goals



¹ <https://www.seeability.org/find-an-optometrist>

² <https://www.seeability.org/>

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<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704171243/http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=314068&fv=21846>

⁴

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704150504/http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=16083>

⁵ <https://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/news/hearing-tests-for-all/>

⁶ <http://easyhealth.org.uk/>

⁷ <http://www.apictureofhealth.southwest.nhs.uk/>

⁸ <http://www.bild.org.uk/resources/easy-read-information/health-easy-read-links/>