

HEALTHY HABITS

Supporting Healthy Habits: Health Professionals
For persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD)



Why may persons with IDD have trouble maintaining health habits?

Many persons with IDD struggle to self-care for their own bodies. Causes may include a lack of knowledge about good health practices, lack of education or support in needed skills, trouble remembering to perform daily habits, or lack of caregiver support.

Health professionals encounter co-morbidities that are related to health habits.

- Body cues include: thirst, hunger, satiety, bladder or rectal stretch signals, sleepiness, etc.
- Co-morbidities triggered by Ignoring body cues include: urinary overflow incontinence, chronic constipation, choking when eating, dehydration, overeating, undernutrition, selective eating, poor hygiene, poor sleep, physical deconditioning, etc.
- The National Advocacy Campaign of direct service providers for persons with IDD teaches about the **“The Fatal Four”** (aspiration, dehydration, constipation, and seizures) as increased causes of mortality in persons with IDD. These are often related to eating too fast or swallowing overly large bites, inadequate daily fluid intake, ignoring stooling frequency issues and failing to recognize seizures.

As health professionals, Healthy Habits tools can make it easier for persons with IDD to take care of their health. The tools are designed to empower person-caregiver teams to define simple and concrete rules for personal health habits, and then teach, reinforce, and use them.

As health professionals, it is pertinent to screen for the status of health habits and consequences of inadequate self-care in patients with IDD. Dental hygiene, nail care, toileting hygiene and bathing habits are common self-care issues.

In one scenario, a caregiver reported that their child wasn’t constipated. But when asked a more concrete, observable question, *How often the patient poops?*, the answer was that he has always pooped every 11 days. They believed this was normal for him rather than a sign of significant chronic constipation.

Some persons with ID have sensory issues that interfere with common daily health practices like bathing, handwashing, and brushing their teeth. Accommodations may be necessary to find an alternate accommodation and/or use a process to gradual desensitize to the process. Behavior consultants and other waiver providers can be of help.

In another scenario, one patient showers motionless every day, holding a soapy washcloth without actually cleaning his body parts. Specific training taught him to *“Count 1-10 as he washes each of the key ten parts of his body”*.

Initial tools for practical usage with patients with IDD include:

- **Healthy Habits Template**
- **Healthy Habits Action Plan**

Additional tools can be used to address individual patient concerns.

