

# Health Observation Guidelines

The following are signs of a person's health status that may be indicators of illness. Observing and reporting them to your supervisor and the Health Care Provider (HCP) will help the HCP to treat the illness appropriately. The HCP needs to understand what is "normal" for that person and what is different now. Sometimes it is not enough to report what you see. Understanding why what you see may be important will make you a better reporter. The information below may help you get ready for a visit with the Health Care Provider.

## HABITS

Smoking and drinking alcohol may cause a person to have health problems based on how often and how long they were used.

- Alcohol can affect how medications work.
- Regular exercise is a healthy habit. Not exercising may cause a person to have health problems.
- It is important for a Health Care Provider to understand a person's sexual activity to be able to provide testing or counseling as appropriate and necessary.

## SLEEP

Sleep is important to stay healthy. Not enough sleep can cause tiredness during the day and lead to daytime napping. It is helpful for the Health Care Provider to know when there is a change in a person's sleep pattern, whether it is an increase or decrease in the amount of time sleeping.

- Having trouble falling asleep may be a symptom of depression.
- Having trouble getting comfortable without adding extra pillows may mean a person has a new health problem.
- Many trips to the bathroom during the night may mean a person has prostate problems or a urinary tract infection.
- Waking up several times during the night and going back to sleep may mean a person has sleep apnea, which means the person stops breathing for short periods of time while sleeping, which causes them to wake up briefly. Sometimes they may snore loudly.
- Consider keeping a sleep log of an individual's waking and sleeping, including when they go to sleep, when they wake, what they do when they wake, and if they can get back to sleep.

## EATING/WEIGHT

Usually, a person's weight does not change much without a reason. We all tend to slowly gain weight as we get older, and our metabolism slows. Other things that can affect weight include:

- A change in activity level or home can make a difference.
- Many of the medications prescribed for "behavior" can make people gain weight.

Weight loss when someone is not trying to lose weight is a concern. A big weight loss can mean that a person is seriously ill. It may also mean that a person is not eating well because of dental pain or painful swallowing.

A very common problem in the individuals we serve is ***Dysphagia***.

- Dysphagia is a swallowing disorder that causes a person to have difficulty chewing and/or swallowing food. Causes of dysphagia can include aging, medication, and neurological disorders. Food can go “down the wrong tube” and end up in the lungs (aspiration). This can happen with no observable change in the person like coughing. This is called “silent aspiration”.
- More frequently there are signs that we can see and that need to be reported: trouble chewing or swallowing, coughing during or after a meal, tiring during a meal, being unwilling to finish the whole meal, avoiding certain foods, textures or temperatures, nose running and sneezing during the meal.

The Health Care Provider needs to know if these symptoms are occurring. Testing will assist them in prescribing a safer diet that will minimize the likelihood of long-term damage to the lungs.

## **CARDIAC**

Heart conditions can occur in individuals from birth or develop as they age.

- Swelling of the feet and ankles or being cold to the touch may be a sign of a change in circulation for an individual.
- A grayish/bluish color to the lips or nails may mean poor circulation as a result of heart problems. When a person has this symptom, or develops chest, jaw or left arm pain, it could potentially be a life-threatening situation to be reported to a supervisor or clinician or 911 should be called. **These symptoms can be a life-threatening emergency. They should not be ignored.**

## **RESPIRATORY**

It is not normal to have frequent colds, coughs, sneezes, or trouble breathing. Some chronic conditions may increase the frequency of these symptoms. These include asthma, cardiac disease, allergies, and aspiration. It is important to report such symptoms to the Health Care Provider. Tests or medications may be prescribed to reduce the frequency or severity of the symptoms.

## **GASTROINTESTINAL**

The gastrointestinal tract is made up of organs that help us digest food and eliminate the waste from food. Gastrointestinal/bowel problems are a frequent complaint. Complaints can mean a chronic problem is getting worse or that a person has a new problem. Sudden abdominal problems are often the cause of a person being admitted

to the hospital. The key is to know what's normal for the person. Significant abdominal pain is not normal and should be considered an urgent problem.

- Frequent vomiting, burping, and heartburn may indicate a developing problem with the stomach or esophagus (food tube).
- Bowel movements should occur frequently enough for the person to be comfortable. This may be daily for some and not less than every 3 days for others. Medication, illness, diet, and fluid intake may all change the pattern. An unexplained change may be important. Increased constipation may result in a bowel obstruction. Frequent loose stools (diarrhea) may be caused by infectious bacteria. Prolonged diarrhea can result in dehydration.
- Blood in the bowel movement may be a sign of hemorrhoidal bleeding or cancer. A change in bowel pattern, consistency, and frequency may be an important sign.

## **NEUROLOGICAL**

Many individuals have known seizure disorders. The symptoms may vary. Seizures may affect the entire body and result in an individual shaking (trembling) and losing consciousness. They may also be minor, with symptoms such as eye blinking with no loss of contact with activity. A seizure disorder can occur at any time of life. It is very important to seek immediate medical attention for the first seizure that someone has. It may be of unknown cause or may result from a fall with a blow to the head. A new seizure disorder must be carefully looked at to rule out brain tumor.

As in other areas, it is important to know what is normal for this person. A change from this is important to report to the health care provider.

Anticonvulsants are prescribed to treat seizures. Common anticonvulsants are Phenytoin, Phenobarbital, Lamotrigine, Valproic Acid, Levetiracetam, Oxcarbazepine, Clobazam, and Carbamazepine. These medications are used to lessen the symptoms and severity of a seizure as well as how often they occur. It is possible for these medications to "build up" in the blood and cause a person to become "toxic" or sick. People who are toxic may appear more tired or have difficulty maintaining their balance. Sometimes people may have a seizure as a result of being toxic. The only way to know for sure is to call the Health Care Provider and obtain a blood test to see how much of the medication is in the person's blood.

## **SKIN and NAILS**

Skin protects the body. It can also tell us about what is happening in the body.

- Skin should be in good repair, soft and elastic without rash and irritation.
- Dry skin may be the result of inadequate fluid intake or exposure to harsh conditions or products.
- Rashes could be signs of many things like an allergy to a medication or substance, a skin condition like eczema, or a serious illness like chicken pox.

- Changing or growing moles and new lumps need to be reported and investigated as possible signs of skin or other cancers.
- Frequently the faster a symptom becomes a problem, the more urgent the problem. The occurrence of a new rash or a severely itchy rash is worth reporting. Often, we know where the irritation comes from, a blister because of a new shoe or a red mark from a brace. While these are small problems, they can be a big problem in day-to-day activity. Not knowing the source of a skin problem is much more serious.

## **MOUTH**

Rarely is a dental issue an emergency. However poor oral health will result in sensitive teeth, gum and tooth infections, and tooth loss. Tooth loss may mean a person cannot eat a balanced diet. Good dental health is vital to overall good nutrition and good health.

- Bad breath may be a sign of oral infections.
- Certain medications may cause a person to have bleeding gums, which can cause mouth pain and infections.
- Medications that treat seizures can cause the gums to swell and grow too much. Good oral care is vital when a person is on these medications.
- Infections that start in the mouth can get into the blood and cause infections in other parts of the body.

## **VISION/HEARING**

Vision and hearing are very important to a person's ability to be involved in and benefit from their daily activities. Many individuals have conditions that affect their vision and hearing. Aging causes some expected changes. Usually this happens gradually, and we need to be very observant to notice changes. Any sudden change is an urgent situation.

- Redness or drainage from the eye may be a sign of an infection.
- Redness and pain may be a sign of a serious problem with pressure in the eye called glaucoma. This urgent situation requires a visit to the Health Care Provider.
- Squinting, needing to move into better light, or sitting closer to the TV may well indicate a change in eyesight. It might be time for glasses or new glasses.
- Drainage from the ear is always a problem that must be referred to the Health Care Provider. Many people have problems with wax build up in their ear canals. Earwax may affect hearing or decrease the ability of a hearing aid to work.
- Loss of hearing can cause a person to have unusual behavior, including depression.

Whenever a change in vision or hearing is noticed, the Health Care Provider needs to know about it and how much it affects the person's daily activities.

## **MOBILITY / MUSCULOSKELETAL**

A person's muscles and bones allow them to be mobile, sit in a chair, and participate in activity. As people age, there may be a significant change in their comfort level or

ability to move around. We all tend to develop aches and pains as we age. We adapt to those changes by not walking quite as fast or shifting in our seat more often.

- Many people may have a bone deformity as a part of their lifelong health problems. An example is scoliosis that affects how they sit or move about.
- Seizure medications can cause or worsen osteoporosis (brittle bones), increasing the risk of fractures.
- People who cannot walk or stand or who cannot participate in weight bearing activity are also more prone to osteoporosis.

The Health Care Provider will look at these symptoms of pain or discomfort in movement and order treatments or exercise to maintain a person's ability to move about. The Health Care Provider will need to know what special shoes or equipment a person uses to have a clear understanding of how the symptoms affect the person. If an individual has a sudden change of mobility, this could indicate an urgent medical issue, and they should be evaluated right away.

## **GENITOURINARY**

It is important to note the normal pattern for a person regarding their urinary or reproductive system. A change from the normal pattern needs to be reported to the health care provider. Urinary tract infections (UTI) are a common problem seen in many people especially if they are incontinent and wear protective underwear.

- Strong, foul odor, going to the bathroom frequently, and burning on urination are all signs of a UTI. Increased accidents may also be a sign of a UTI.
- There are changes to a person's pattern of urination that are part of the normal aging process. For example, the prostate enlarges in many men. These men will report dribbling or difficulty starting and stopping to urinate. They may need to urinate more frequently.
- Women's menstrual cycles generally have a pattern to them. Pain during a woman's cycle may affect her ability to enjoy certain activities. Changes in the cycle may be normal or indicate a new problem. Unusual vaginal bleeding or discharge requires reporting to the health care provider.

## **BEHAVIOR**

How a person is acting can be an indication of how they are feeling. While everyone is different, there are some observations that can be made that will assist the health care provider in asking the right questions. The most important key is to note change from a "normal" pattern.

If someone begins having difficulty sleeping, they begin to cause harm to themselves or others, or they are very anxious and argue easily, this may indicate a new behavioral/psychiatric problem. It may be an understandable response to a new situation or an illness. Observing what is going on and identifying the problem will help decide what treatment is best.