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# DDS SafetyNet

PROMOTING CHOICE AND OPTIONS IN THE COMMUNITY FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

## Recognizing the Non-Verbal Signs of Infection

The days are getting shorter, and there is a little chill in the breeze. Fall is here, and winter is on its way! As the weather gets colder, the people you support are more likely to develop internal infections. Many individuals with developmental disabilities may have trouble communicating when they are not feeling well, and they rely on you to notice that they are sick. If you notice the early warning signs of infection, you may be able to prevent a visit to the hospital, or even a fatal illness.

### Alejandro and Hannah

Alejandro works at a residential facility. He spends time with Hannah, a young woman with cerebral palsy and mental retardation. Although nonverbal, Hannah is usually lively and enjoys interacting with Alejandro and the other staff and residents.

One day, Alejandro notices Hannah seems irritable. She refuses to eat or drink, and grimaces when she swallows. Hannah usually enjoys the weekly trip to the farmers' market, but today, she cries when Alejandro brings her coat. He notices that Hannah is warm to the touch. She shakes her head and hits her neck with her hands when Alejandro asks her what is wrong.

### Grace and Jeffrey

Grace works at a community based day program. For the past few days, Jeffrey has been going to the bathroom more than usual. When Grace asks if he is okay, Jeffrey seems embarrassed. He says that he feels like he has to urinate, but it hurts to try and nothing comes out. Grace notices that Jeffrey seems tired, and keeps rubbing his lower back as if he is in pain.

### Signs of Infection

Hannah and Jeffrey are showing signs of possible internal infections.

Hannah's fever and apparent pain when swallowing indicate that she may have a sore throat. Alejandro calls her doctor, describes her symptoms, and makes an appointment for Hannah.

Jeffrey may have a urinary tract or kidney infection. Grace assists Jeffrey to call his doctor. He tells the doctor his complaints. The doctor asks him to come in for a checkup today.

By paying attention to changes in Hannah's and Jeffrey's behavior, Alejandro and Grace are able to recognize the signs of an internal infection. Their quick thinking may prevent a hospitalization.

## Non-Verbal Signs of Internal Infections

If someone you support has an internal infection, he or she may feel warm to the touch (feverish), seem tired or irritable, or sleep more or less than usual. If the person has trouble communicating with words, he or she may cry, moan, or scream.

### Kidney and Urinary Tract Infections

- Frequent urge to urinate (even if the person urinates very little)
- Pain during urination
- Cloudy, red, or strong-smelling urine
- Signs of pain in back, side or lower abdomen
- Nausea or vomiting
- Mental confusion

### Ear, Nose, and Throat Infections

- Rubbing or pulling on nose, neck or ears
- Tilting or waving head
- Red ears
- Trouble hearing – doesn't respond when called or talked to
- Holding, hitting, or banging head
- Refusing to swallow or eat
- Sounds different from usual (hoarse)

### Other Symptoms of Infection

- Earache, fluid coming from the ears
- Sore throat
- Swollen tonsils or lymph nodes
- Bright red throat with white or yellow spots
- Headache
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Pain or pressure in face, tooth pain
- Reduced sense of taste or smell



## Talking to the Doctor about Internal Infections

Did you know that internal infections are some of the most common reasons that individuals with developmental disabilities are hospitalized during the fall and winter months? No one likes to go to the hospital, especially for an illness that could have been treated at home with the right advice from a doctor. If you talk to a doctor as soon as you suspect that someone you support has an internal infection, you may be able to prevent a visit to the hospital, or even a fatal illness.

### What to Tell the Doctor

If you think that someone has an internal infection, the best thing for you to do is to call the person's doctor. When you call the doctor, be prepared to describe:

- ✓ What symptoms the person has complained of (for example, pain when going to the bathroom; throat, ear, or eye pain)
- ✓ Any behavior changes you have noticed (for example, frequent trips to the bathroom; pulling on ears; banging head; more or less time spent sleeping)
- ✓ Any other changes you have noticed (for example, the person's urine smells or looks different than usual; fluid coming out of the ears; vomiting or diarrhea)
- ✓ How long the symptoms or behavior changes have been happening
- ✓ If the individual has a fever, how long the fever has lasted, and what temperatures you have recorded
- ✓ Current medications, and any allergies
- ✓ Relevant medical history (for example, diabetes; history of urinary tract infections; history of sinus infections)
- ✓ If friends or family members have been ill recently

The doctor may ask you to bring the person in for a checkup. To prepare for this appointment, you should bring your written record of the symptoms and behavior changes you have noticed.

At the appointment, the doctor will talk with the person you support about how he or she is feeling. You can help to provide information.

The doctor will also examine the person – perhaps by looking in his or her ears and throat. The doctor may also take samples from the person's body (such as blood, urine, or a throat swab) to send to the lab.

Depending on the diagnosis, the doctor may prescribe rest, a special diet, or medication. Give the doctor a list of the person's current medications and allergies. By giving the doctor this information, you can help to prevent medication errors and dangerous medication interactions.

If the person you support receives antibiotics, make sure that he or she takes all the prescribed doses. Even if the person feels better before the medication is gone, it is important to finish the antibiotics. Otherwise, the infection could come back.

## FYI Resource Links for Better Living

For more information on internal infections, you can visit the following websites.

“Things to Ask My Doctor” checklist for consumers:

<http://www.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=282>

Medline Plus – Kidney Infection:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000522.htm>

Information on sinusitis:

<http://www.webmd.com/allergies/guide/allergies-sinusitis>

Information on ear infections:

<http://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/Ear-Infection/default.htm>

Information on strep throat:

<http://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/Strep-Throat-Topic-Overview>

Information on viral gastroenteritis:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/faq.htm>

Check out

**www.ddssafety.net**

for more information that can help individuals with developmental disabilities live healthier and happier lives!

The site is translated into Spanish and Tagalog!

*Just log on and tell us what you think!*