



Learning Disabilities Mortality Review (LeDeR) Programme: Fact Sheet 21

Postural Care

Key considerations for reviewers

- Did the person have physical impairments or related health problems which may have limited movement and mobility (e.g. cerebral palsy, hypertonia (increased contraction of muscles), hypotonia (decreased muscle tone) spinal deformity (lordosis, scoliosis, kyphosis), spina bifida, Rett syndrome)?
- Did the person have difficulty varying or controlling their position during the day or night?
- Was the person receiving support from an occupational therapist or physiotherapist expert in postural care?
- Did the person have a detailed plan as to how their body could be protected and restored by providing postural care?
- Did the person use specialised equipment (e.g. wheelchair, postural seating, lying supports)?
- Was the person easily able to access reassessments, repairs and replacements for wheelchairs, seating or positional supports when required?

Introduction

Children and young people who have profound and multiple disabilities, or physical impairments which limit their movements are at increased risk of developing body shape distortion. This can result in postural problems such as hip dislocation, scoliosis and pain, and lead to difficulties with breathing, eating and drinking and digestion. Postural problems and changes in chest shape can exacerbate existing difficulties with swallowing and may increase the risk of aspiration resulting in respiratory infections. The Confidential Inquiry into Premature Deaths of people with learning disabilities (CIPOLD, 2013) highlighted that people with learning disabilities are a high-risk group for deaths from respiratory problems and recommended that Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) should ensure they commission expert, preventative services including proactive postural care support.

Key Principles

With appropriate postural care and support, distortion of body shape is not an inevitable consequence for people who have difficulties varying or controlling their position. Postural care is about using the right equipment and positioning techniques to help protect and restore body shape. Postural care may be provided by a variety of people who support a person with learning disabilities, (e.g. family member, personal assistant, paid carer, or professionals such as physiotherapists). Occupational therapists and physiotherapists work with individuals and their families and paid carers to ensure that postural support is provided on a 24 hours basis and specialised equipment is used as appropriate.



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Why is postural care important?

Failing to protect body shape leads to loss of mobility which can increase the need for specialised equipment, support and surgery. It can also lead to pain, discomfort and the following secondary health complications:

- Contractures where the muscles tighten up and the person cannot straighten their limbs.
- Scoliosis or curvature of the spine.
- Respiratory difficulties and chest infections.
- Difficulties swallowing (dysphagia).
- Poor digestion, heart burn and reflux.
- Constipation.
- Pressure on internal organs.
- Recurrent pressure sores.

Postural Management Plan

A postural management plan should include:

- An assessment of need, including how the person communicates and how discomfort could be recognised.
- The setting of postural management goals and a risk and benefit analysis of potential strategies for reaching these, taking into account other health conditions such as respiratory, continence or temperature regulation problems, epilepsy or gastrooesophageal reflux.
- A package of interventions including the provision of often highly specialised equipment (wheelchair, postural seating, support for lying postures, standing or walking frames, moving and handling equipment).
- Ongoing support, measurement and review.

Summary of key points

Postural care is about providing support and the right equipment to reduce the risk of body distortion and health related complications. Postural support can prevent people experiencing body and health complications such as scoliosis or curvature of the spine, respiratory difficulties and chest infections, poor digestion, heat burn, reflux and constipation which can lead to premature death.

Additional sources of information

Mencap

- Postural Care Action Group www.mencap.org.uk/posturalcare

National Elf Service

- Postural care article www.nationalelfservice.net/learning-disabilities/profound-and-multiple-learning-disability/postural-care-pathway-for-people-with-learning-disabilities/
- Postural care pathway www.nationalelfservice.net/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/postural-care-pathway.pdf



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