Healthy lifestyles

People with intellectual disability should be involved in all decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Some people can make decisions alone and some people will need support. It is critical that supporters know the person's will and preferences to make sure the right support is provided and the right decision is made.

A healthy lifestyle includes a good diet, regular exercise and rest. People with intellectual disability have higher rates of obesity and get less exercise than the general population.

An intellectual disability makes it harder for someone to understand about a healthy lifestyle. Health promotion campaigns often do not get to people with intellectual disability and often healthy lifestyle issues are overlooked by support staff and carers.

Families, advocates and support workers can do lots of things to help people with intellectual disability to lead healthy lifestyles.

Nutrition

Encouraging someone to eat healthy food can be a challenge. It requires patience and practice. You may have to balance people's right to make their own choices against the importance of having a healthy diet.

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There is a lot of information available about healthy eating. Eating food that contains too much energy (calories), fat or sugar can lead to being overweight. This can cause illnesses like heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and some cancers.

Many people with intellectual disability are overweight. Some, particularly people with high support needs, are underweight.

If someone is overweight or underweight, you should get advice from a health professional. A dietitian can recommend a suitable diet. Sometimes, the GP can arrange for Medicare to pay for this.

Exercise and rest

Many people with intellectual disability do not get enough exercise. Respecting people's right to make their own lifestyle choices is important but physical activity makes people feel better, builds skills and helps prevent obesity and lifestyle diseases. Try to find something the person enjoys and then build it into their weekly routine.

Any type of exercise is good – dancing to music or walking to the shops. However, for people to lose weight, they need to work up a bit of a sweat.

Sometimes, a person should see a doctor before starting vigorous exercise – for example, if the person is ageing, has been inactive, has major health problems or has heart disease in the family.

Getting enough rest is also important. Doctors recommend that adults have 7 to 8 hours sleep a night.

Smoking and drinking

Smoking and drinking too much alcohol cause serious health problems. The *I can quit* program helps people with intellectual disability to stop smoking.

Barriers to healthy lifestyles

People with intellectual disability can miss out on health information online, in magazines, brochures and books. On the other hand, they may be easily influenced. If people feel well they can find it hard to understand the importance of healthy life style choices.

In the past, there was not much focus on nutrition and exercise in disability accommodation services. People were often excluded from mainstream leisure activities.

So, it is important to help people with intellectual disability learn about healthy lifestyles and provide opportunities for exercise.

For more information

Australian dietary guidelines
www.nhmrc.gov.au

Disability – Managing underweight fact sheet
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/disability-managing-underweight

National physical activity guidelines
www.health.gov.au/internet

I can quit manual
www.icanquit.com.au

You might be interested in these fact sheets

- **Alcohol and other drugs**

- **Getting the most out of Medicare**

This fact sheet was updated in **2018**.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to look at the information in this fact sheet carefully with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.