



A Companion Piece For Healthcare Professionals: Using Visual and Text Guides When Talking to Patients with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

Improved medical care and social support have led to better and longer lives for many people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). This means more people with an IDD are living well into adulthood, however many people have had negative experiences in healthcare settings.

Adults with an IDD range in ability. Some function fairly independently with limited help, while others need considerable or full support. Regardless of their ability, adults with an IDD require special consideration if they are sick or admitted to the hospital, especially for serious illnesses like sepsis or septic shock.

Sepsis Alliance created two guides, one visual and one more text-based, to help healthcare professionals and caregivers when they work with this population. The guides explain to the patients how they can help reduce their risk of infection and sepsis, and what to expect if they become ill enough to require medical care.

You can use these guides by choosing the most appropriate for your patient. The text-based guide uses easy-to-understand language to explain things like how infections occur, when to wash their hands, the importance of vaccines, and what to do if they start to feel sick.

The visual guide relies more on images to help your patient visualize things, such as what they might see in a hospital room or intensive care unit. The guide was created so you can use only one page, if desired, instead of the whole guide.

Giving your patient a guide that is theirs to keep can help them feel a bit of control and help them understand what is going on around them. The words and photos can be a starting point for you to discuss how they feel, what they need to know, and how you will help them.

Here are some tips that may be helpful when working with adults with an IDD, especially if they are admitted to the hospital for sepsis or septic shock:

- Speak directly to the patient, even if they have a caregiver, and have empathy.
- Speak clearly and slowly, avoiding jargon. Take pauses so as not to overwhelm.
- If your patient can, ask them to repeat back instructions or things you want them to remember.
- Try to have conversations in a private, quiet area, free of distractions.
- Keep sentences short and with one topic at a time.
- If the patient has a communication tool, such as a picture board, sign language, or a phone app, ask the caregiver to show you how to use it.
- Allow your patient to have a comfort tool/favorite item if they want it.

Learn more about sepsis, and access resources, at [Sepsis.org](https://sepsis.org).

Access a clinical education course about sepsis and caring for patients with IDD at [SepsisInstitute.org](https://sepsisinstitute.org)

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