

Aging with Developmental Disabilities: Effects on the Senses

As the individuals that you support grow older, you may notice that some things that used to be easy for them to do have become more difficult. For instance, as people grow older, it may become harder for them to read the small letters in their newspapers, to hear the music coming from their radios, or to taste their favorite foods. It is harder for them to do these things because, as we get older, our bodies can change in ways that cause a decline in our senses. As our senses decline, it becomes harder for us to see, hear, taste, smell, feel, move, and balance. Everybody may experience age-related declines in their senses; however, people with developmental disabilities may experience these sensory declines at an earlier age than others and may be less able to express what kind of trouble they are having. As the individuals that you support grow older, they may need more assistance in their everyday activities.

Changes in Vision

Eye problems become more common as people age. Older people are more likely to:

- Have dry, scratchy eyes.
- Get eye infections.
- Lose the ability to see things in sharp focus.

As a support provider, be aware of behavior that could be a sign of vision problems. You should look out for behavior such as squinting, rubbing the eyes, shutting or covering one eye, tilting or thrusting the head, or holding things very close to the face to look at them. If you see this behavior among those individuals that you support, you should encourage them to visit their doctor. With the help of their doctor, they may be able to improve their eyesight by getting glasses or even by having surgery.

You can support people with declining eyesight by increasing lighting levels in their home or workplace and by making sure that the older people who you support receive periodic eye exams.

Changes in Hearing

Older people often have trouble with their hearing as well. Older people are more likely to:

- Find it hard to hear high-pitched tones.
- Have a hard time focusing on someone's voice if there is a lot of background noise.

As a support provider, be aware of behavior that could indicate hearing problems. You should watch for behavior such as turning up the volume on the TV or radio, speaking loudly, or withdrawing from social situations. If you see this behavior among those individuals that you support, you should encourage them to visit their doctor. A doctor may be able to help older individuals improve their hearing by giving them hearing aids or cleaning their ears.

You can support people with hearing loss by looking directly at them when you are speaking, speaking clearly and slowly, and allowing the person time to sort out what you have said.

Changes in Taste and Smell

The senses of taste and smell get weaker as people age. Older people often:

- Have a hard time tasting foods.
- Do not feel thirsty, even when their bodies need water.

Since older consumers may not be able to taste or smell their food as well as they did before, they may not eat as much. If you find that individuals who you support are experiencing difficulties with tasting and smelling, you should encourage them to talk to their doctor. Their doctor may be able to tell if this loss of taste and smell is normal or if it is being caused by some disease that can be treated.

You can support people who have declining senses of taste and smell by adding more seasonings to the food you prepare (although salt should be avoided), checking whether food tastes or smells spoiled, and reminding older people to drink enough water to avoid dehydration.

Changes in the Skin

As people age, changes in their skin can cause their sense of touch to decline. As people get older:

- Their skin becomes dryer and thinner and can crack or break.
- Their skin can bruise easily.
- They are more likely to develop pressure sores if they have limited mobility.
- Their skin becomes less able to adjust to temperatures that are too warm or too cold.

As a support provider, you should be aware of signs of skin problems. Examine skin for cuts, burns, and pressure sores and look out for people wearing jackets indoors because they feel cold. If you notice that those in your care are experiencing difficulties with their skin, you should encourage them to talk to their doctor. Their doctor may be able to give them tips about what to do to stay healthy and how to not injure themselves even with their declining sense of touch.

You can support older people and help prevent dry and flaky skin by gently rinsing away soap after baths, drying the skin, and applying moisturizing lotion. You can also help by making sure that people who cannot move themselves are frequently repositioned and by trying to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature. Also, make sure that hot and cold water faucets are easy to identify, and easy to turn on and off.

Changes in Movement and Balance

Aging can also cause changes in movement and balance. As people grow older:

- Muscles lose their strength and tone.
- Joints become more difficult to move.

- Bones break more easily (especially for women).

You may notice that those having trouble with balance and mobility may move slowly or unsteadily, or use walls or furniture to help them balance. If you observe that the older individuals that you support are having a hard time moving and balancing, you should encourage them to talk to their doctor. The doctor may be able to recommend certain exercises that older people can do to keep strong. The doctor may also assess for and recommend assistive devices, such as canes or walkers, to assist with balance.

You can support older people by promoting regular exercise, especially using weights, to help strengthen bones and muscles. To prevent falls, you can install stair railings and non-skid strips on stairs and in bathtubs.

Remind individuals that just because their bodies are changing as they grow older, this does not mean that they will have to stop doing the things that they enjoy. By talking with their doctors and making some small changes in their lives, the individuals you support can stay safe and healthy while they age!

Resources

Growing Older with a Developmental Disability: Physical and Cognitive Changes and Their Implications

https://depts.washington.edu/aedd/growing_older_dd_Factor.html

The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability

<http://www.nchpad.org/>