Healthy Lifestyle Choices for People with Developmental Disabilities

All people, including those with developmental disabilities, make choices every day that can influence their health and safety. As a direct support professional, you can educate the individuals you support about different healthy choices they can make. You can also encourage and assist individuals as they learn how to make healthy choices.

In particular, you can encourage individuals to:
1. Choose nutritious foods.
2. Add physical activity into their daily lives.
3. Keep their minds active.
4. Avoid smoking, drugs, and alcohol.
5. Maintain a safe living environment.
6. See a doctor and dentist regularly.
7. Build a strong social support system.
8. Have an active social life.

Making healthy choices in these eight areas will increase the chances that the individuals you support are able to live long and healthy lives. By making healthy lifestyle choices, the people you support will lower their risks for:
1. Obesity.
2. Heart disease.
3. High cholesterol.
4. Serious illnesses, such as cancer.
5. Feelings of loneliness or isolation.
6. Mental illnesses, such as depression.
7. Injuries.

By lowering their risks for these conditions, the individuals who you support are also lowering their risk for unplanned hospitalizations.

Although it is important for all people to learn about choices they can make to improve their health and safety, this information can be especially important for individuals with developmental disabilities. People with developmental disabilities often need additional support as they work to make healthy lifestyle choices.

You can help by educating the individuals you support about the different healthy choices they can make. Think creatively, and talk with other health care professionals about how to support individuals in making choices that work with each person’s particular disability.

Healthy Eating
Making nutritious food choices is one of the best ways to stay healthy. By eating a nourishing diet, the individuals you support will lower their chances of becoming obese or under-weight and of developing serious diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and
You will be able to support the person by helping them to achieve their desired weight.

You can support individuals by letting them know what foods are healthy and which are not. Remind the individuals you support to choose healthy foods over unhealthy ones. Some basic healthy eating tips that you can share include:

1. Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day
2. Choose foods that are low in fat; this can include lean cuts of meat, low- or non-fat dairy products (like one-percent milk or low-fat yogurt), and fruits and vegetables
3. Don’t add salt to food
4. Avoid eating too many unhealthy foods such as fried foods (like french fries) or foods with lots of sugar (like sodas, cakes, and candies)

These are just a few tips for healthy eating. For more information, be sure to check out the resources at the end of this article or talk to a doctor or nutritionist. Some of the individuals you support may need to follow special diets because of their disabilities or chronic diseases (such as diabetes). Always ask an individual’s doctor before making any changes in his or her diet.

Physical Activity

Another great way to stay healthy is to add physical activity into daily life. By becoming more physically active, the individuals you support will lower their chances of developing many types of illnesses.

You can encourage individuals to be more physically active and support people to find out which activities will fit into their lifestyles. Some of the individuals you support may need additional attention as they work to add physical activity into their lives. For example, a person with cerebral palsy or another developmental disability that makes moving difficult may find it hard to include exercise in her life. This does not mean that this person cannot make healthy lifestyle choices. It simply means that she will need extra support from you, her family, and her friends.

For instance, you could help this individual learn about exercises that she can do in bed or while sitting in a wheelchair. Doctors and other health care professionals can also assist individuals in making an enjoyable exercise plan that is appropriate for their current levels of fitness. Physical therapists are able to demonstrate ways to adapt exercises based on the person’s physical capacity; considering range of motion, strength, balance, and cardiac health.

In addition to formal exercise plans, you can support individuals to make choices that add physical activity into their daily lives. For instance, as much as they are able, you can encourage each person to:

1. Walk or propel her wheelchair instead of asking for transportation from their support person, if the destination is within a reasonable distance.
2. Ask their support person to park at the far end of parking lots and walk or propel her wheelchair to her destination.
3. Take the stairs instead of the elevator, unless the person uses a wheelchair.
4. Physically move during the day, whenever possible, such as getting up to change the television channel instead of using a remote control.

Remember to talk to the individual’s doctor before they start any new exercise plan. A doctor will be able to tell you which exercises are right for the individuals you support and how to help each person to exercise safely.

Mental Stimulation
Mental stimulation can affect both the physical and emotional health of the individuals who you support. You can help individuals to stay healthy by helping them keep their minds active throughout their lives. For instance, you can support and encourage individuals to:
1. Read a book or magazine.
2. Watch, read, or listen to the news.
3. Take a class.
4. Play board games or cards with others.
5. Visit new places and go to cultural events.

Another way for individuals to keep their minds active is to find a job that is rewarding and enjoyable. If individuals do not have a job, but are able to work, you can encourage them to talk to a job counselor about jobs that would be right for them. For individuals who already have a job, you can explore how the person is being fulfilled by the job and if they enjoy it. If the person is not being fulfilled or mentally stimulated by their current job, you can discuss and explore with the person the possibility of changing jobs to do something new, something they may have dreamed of doing.

Individuals may need extra support in keeping their minds active as they age. Once individuals stop going to school or stop working, you may need to give each person new ideas of how they can spend their days in ways that are mentally stimulating.

Avoid Smoking, Drugs, and Alcohol
Another very important way to stay healthy is not to smoke or take illegal drugs and to limit the use of alcohol. Smoking is addictive and causes many diseases, including lung diseases and different kinds of cancer. Drug and alcohol abuse can also lead to many health and emotional problems. As a direct support professional, you can educate the individuals you support about the dangers of smoking and abusing drugs and alcohol.

If any of the individuals who you support already smoke, you can encourage the person to quit smoking. Encourage individuals to talk to their doctor about the different treatments that can help people to quit smoking. If any of the individuals you support are taking illegal drugs or abusing alcohol, you can also encourage each person to talk to their doctor about treatment programs that may work for them.
A Safe Living Environment
By choosing to maintain a safe living environment, the individuals you support can prevent injury to themselves and others. You can help individuals maintain a safe living environment by encouraging each person to:

1. Keep poisonous substances and cleaning supplies well-labeled and in a safe place.
2. Make sure that smoke detectors are working properly.
3. Make sure that light bulbs and night lights are working properly.
4. Keep floors and stairways clear of things that people could trip on.
5. Cover exposed wires.
6. Keep a well-stocked and up-to-date First Aid Kit.
7. Keep medicines well-labeled and in a safe place.

If you notice any area that looks unsafe, talk to the individual about how they could make their living environment safer. For larger safety concerns, you may also need to talk to group home directors or the administrators of long-term care facilities about changes they can make.

Regular Health Care Visits
To stay safe and healthy, individuals should see their health care providers on a regular basis, including preventive care visits when they are not feeling sick. By encouraging individuals to visit their doctor and dentist regularly, you can help people avoid more serious health concerns in the future.

In general, people with developmental disabilities should see their doctors for a preventive health care check-up at least once a year and their dentists at least every six months. You can support individuals by keeping a calendar of their scheduled appointments and by assisting the person to make appointments at the appropriate times. You can also support individuals by helping them prepare for their health care visits. For instance, you could let the person practice talking to you about his health concerns and help him write down questions so he will be ready to talk to his doctor. You also can help him keep a record of any medicines he takes regularly and remind him to bring that record to his doctor appointments.

A Strong Social Support System
A support system is a group of people that individuals can go to whenever they need help, advice, or support in any way. Having a strong support system is vital to mental and physical health.

Some of the individuals you support may need reminders about all of the people who are willing and available to help them. This support system can include:

1. You, their direct support professional
2. Family
3. Friends
4. Health care providers
5. Co-workers
6. Social workers
7. Teachers
8. Regional center staff
9. Anyone else who they trust

You can encourage individuals to make a list of names and phone numbers of friends and relatives in their support systems and keep the list nearby as a reminder.

An Active Social Life
A lively social life is one of the best ways for individuals to build their support system and keep their minds and bodies active. Staying home alone can contribute to physical and mental health issues such as overeating, isolation, or depression.

You can encourage and support individuals to find ways to get out and be active! Let individuals know about all of the options in their communities and help people choose which options are most appropriate for their lives. For instance, you can support individuals to:

1. Join a club.
2. Join a sports team.
3. Take a class.
4. Spend time being active with friends and family.

Individuals can build a support system by participating in social events in the community. You can let individuals and their families know about events or activities that they may find interesting and enjoyable. You can also go with individuals to these events to support them as they make new friends. For individuals who find it difficult to travel into the community, you could encourage them to interact socially by communicating with friends they know and trust over the internet or by telephone or by inviting friends and families to their home.

Resources
It may be helpful for the individuals you support to talk with you about ways they can improve their lifestyle choices. You can help the person decide what choices make the most sense for them. It may even be helpful for individuals to write down their healthy lifestyle choices. This planning sheet can be a helpful starting point:

- [http://ddssafety.net/sites/default/files/attachments/10-07-20/TOOLHealthyLifestyleChoices.pdf](http://ddssafety.net/sites/default/files/attachments/10-07-20/TOOLHealthyLifestyleChoices.pdf)

You can also support individuals to learn more about healthy lifestyle choices. They can learn more by talking with health care professionals or by checking out these resources on the internet:
Other web resources:

- Healthier US
- Healthy People 2020
  https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/tools-and-resources/Healthy-People-eLearning
- Nutrition.gov
  http://nutrition.gov
- National Center on Physical Activity and Disability (NCPAD)
  http://www.nchpad.org/

Also, encourage individuals to check out the DDS Safety Net every month to learn about additional health and safety topics. To see previous presentations and articles, you and the individuals you support can browse through the DDS Safety Net using the Search tool at: http://www.ddssafety.net/