

What you need to know about . . .

# Infection

- **Infection** is a condition that occurs when organisms, like bacteria or viruses, enter the body and multiply. We experience the signs and symptoms of infection when our bodies react to these organisms. Infections can be minor and easy to overcome, or life-threatening.
- **Sepsis** is a life-threatening infection which occurs when a person's immune system fails to respond to an infection, and the infection spreads throughout the body. Sometimes sepsis is called blood poisoning.

Although every person is at risk for infection, there are certain conditions and circumstances common for persons with I/DD that increase risk. Be very watchful for infection if a person you support:

- Is at risk of aspiration. (Aspiration pneumonia is an infection.)
- Has a history of frequent constipation. The risk of infection is much higher if the individual has had *even one* bowel obstruction in their lifetime.
- Is incontinent or experiences problems with voiding urine.
- Has any condition or behavior that leads to injury to the skin, the body's barrier to infection.
- Needs a lot of assistance with basic hygiene, such as hand washing, brushing teeth, and bathing.
- Is in close contact with someone else who has a contagious infection.
- Has a condition that makes it more difficult for their body to fight infection, such as HIV or cancer or taking certain medications that suppress the immune system.
- Is 65 or older.

Know the risks

# Know the signs

Infections take many forms, depending on what parts of the body are affected:

- FEVER is always a sign of infection and should be assessed.
- Unexplained BEHAVIOR changes are often a sign of infection or illness.
- Skin infections can take many forms. Any change in the appearance of the skin should be assessed, including rash or redness, open areas, drainage, discoloration, ulcers, and wounds.
- Influenza (flu) often appears with fever and chills, muscle aches, headache, dizziness, lack of energy, sore throat, and/or cough.
- Early signs of pneumonia include cough, fever, shortness of breath, pain in chest, loss of energy, and loss of appetite.
- Urinary tract infections and kidney infections should be suspected with pain in the lower abdominal area or back, blood in urine, difficulty urinating, and/or cloudy, discolored, or foul-smelling urine.
- Gastroenteritis (stomach flu) usually appears with pain or cramps in the abdomen, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, fever, and/or loss of energy.

## Know what to do

What to do to prevent infection from turning into sepsis:

- Seek medical treatment at the earliest sign of infection.
- If a person is not recovering from infection as expected or seems to be getting worse even with treatment, let the doctor know right away.
- Practice universal precautions and help people you support do the same.
- Follow instructions of the doctors and nurses providing treatment, including taking all medications as ordered.

### **IN AN EMERGENCY:**

**The best chance of surviving sepsis is catching it early. Call 9-1-1 immediately if the person:**

- Loses consciousness (becomes unresponsive)
- High fever, possibly with chills
- Rapid or irregular pulse
- Fast breathing
- Low blood pressure
- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Sudden appearance of red, splotchy skin



State of Georgia  
Department of Behavioral Health  
and Developmental Disabilities

This Infection Fact Sheet is #8 in a series of Improving Health Outcomes Fact Sheets. It was developed with reference to resources available through the Missouri Department of Mental Health and the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. This Fact Sheet is not a substitute for clinical evaluation or physician's orders.