

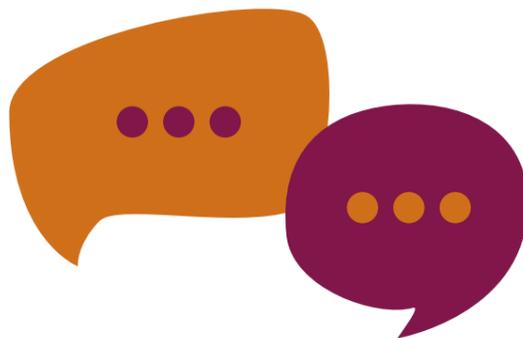
# Tips for assessing illness in children with Down syndrome

Most children with Down syndrome have some physiological and behavioural differences that can make it difficult to assess the severity of illness when they present at a GP or hospital. These tips are designed to ensure they receive the best possible care.



## Differences in health presentation in terms of health conditions & symptoms

- **Poor temperature control**  
May not develop a fever at all or may be hypothermic instead.
- **Vulnerable immune system**  
Infections that usually cause only minor illnesses can be more serious.
- **Co-existing conditions**  
Remember to check for other conditions commonly seen with Down syndrome such as heart conditions, GORD, coeliac, autism, thyroid disease, sleep apnoea, vision and hearing impairments.
- **More infections**  
Chest and ear infections are more common due to narrow tubes which produce more mucus. Infections can progress rapidly in young children.
- **Atypical presentations**  
Serious illnesses can present atypically such as sepsis and leukaemia, e.g. chest infections/pneumonia with sepsis may present as diarrhoea and vomiting. It is also common for young children to remain happy and alert during serious illnesses so use caution when using demeanour to assess condition.
- **Medications**  
Check for interactions when changing or prescribing new medications.



## Communication

- **Explain and reassure**  
People can often have sensory processing difficulties and may be very wary of new sensations. For example, BP cuffs and SATS probes may be terrifying, so it is extra important to take the time to explain and reassure. Modelling equipment first can be helpful.
- **Optimising communication strategies**  
People can often understand more than they can express. Often great visual learners (but may have poor short-term auditory memory and hearing loss) so use sign, pictures and gestures. Speak slowly, clearly and maintain eye contact. Allow time for a response, and don't hurry a reply.

This poster has been adapted from a UK resource developed by [www.mountainmedicine.co.uk](http://www.mountainmedicine.co.uk)

Down Syndrome Australia would like to acknowledge and thank Mountain Medicine for allowing the original poster to be used and updated for the Australia health care setting.

**Please note:**  
This document provides general information and is not meant to replace advice from a health professional. Please seek advice from your doctor if you have any health concerns about your child.

## Gathering information

- If you don't know the individual child at their baseline, ask the parents because they know their child best.
- Encourage families to use healthcare 'passports' – a small booklet filled with information detailing the person's health needs, their likes, dislikes and contacts.



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