

---

# Health checks for adults with intellectual disabilities

---

## FROM THE SPECIALTIES

MONICA ISABEL OLSEN

[monica.i.olsen@uit.no](mailto:monica.i.olsen@uit.no)

Monica Isabel Olsen, PhD, intellectual disability nurse and lecturer at the Department of Education, UiT The Arctic University of Norway. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

ERIK SØNDENAA

Erik Søndena, associate professor at the Department of Mental Health, NTNU and researcher at the Regional Centre of Expertise for Security, Prison and Forensic Psychiatry Central Norway, St. Olav's Hospital, Trondheim University Hospital.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

ANITA TYMI

Anita Tymi, service user representative with the Norwegian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, registered nurse with a master's degree in habilitation/rehabilitation and lecturer at the Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Nord University.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

SILJE TESSEM

Silje Tessem, senior consultant and doctoral research fellow at the Department of Rehabilitation, University Hospital of North Norway, Tromsø.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

ELLEN MELBYE LANGBALLE

Ellen Melbye Langballe, cand.polit., PhD in psychology, senior researcher and head of ageing research and development at the Norwegian National Centre for Ageing and Health, Vestfold Hospital Trust, Tønsberg, and the Department of Geriatric Medicine, Oslo University Hospital.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

ERIK BAUTZ-HOLTER

Erik Bautz-Holter, professor emeritus at the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Oslo University Hospital.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

AUDNY ANKE

Audny Anke, specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Senior consultant at the Department of Rehabilitation, University Hospital of North Norway, and professor at UiT The Arctic University of Norway.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

---

## **New national guidelines recommend annual health checks for adults with intellectual disabilities.**

Adults with a diagnosis of intellectual disability die earlier, have poorer health and more difficulty accessing health services than the general population (1). Annual health checks have been recommended in Norway and internationally for many years because they help identify ill health and serious illnesses (2). However, 43 % of adult participants in the Norwegian North Health in Intellectual Disability (NOHID) study had not undergone a health check in the past year (3). In 2021, the recommendation for annual health checks for adults with intellectual disabilities was incorporated into the national guidelines on good health and care services for people with intellectual disabilities (2).

Health monitoring is poorest among people with severe cognitive impairments and those with a concurrent autism diagnosis (4). The symptoms will often differ from what is typically expected. Altered behaviour can be an expression of pain, mental illness or early-stage dementia. Weight and physical activity are health determinants that require special attention.

Common conditions include epilepsy, constipation, vision impairments, hypothyroidism, hearing impairments, cerebral palsy and motor impairments that cause balance problems (4, 5). Some conditions occur more frequently in those with a more severe degree of intellectual disability than in those with a milder degree, and vice versa. Few women undergo cancer screening (3).

---

## How can we ensure annual checks are carried out?

After the reform in health care for those with intellectual disabilities in 1991, the responsibility for health services was divided between general practitioners (GPs), other medical specialties and the specialist habilitation service. The responsibility for carrying out health checks was assigned to GPs (2). Practice managers for those providing practical help in the municipality are responsible for scheduling health checks.

GPs may feel uncertain when meeting patients with congenital cognitive impairments, and the examination situation is often challenging for the patient (6). There will be a need for information from close relatives, communication support and assistance in conducting the health check (6). The Norwegian National Centre for Ageing and Health has developed informational material for GPs and people with intellectual disabilities.

Primary care teams have been tested and show promise. Checks can be systematised by having support persons who know the patient complete a checklist beforehand to capture changes and risk factors. It is recommended to create a health follow-up plan, use a hospital passport and enquire about the use of an individual plan (7). The role of the specialist habilitation service in health monitoring needs to be further clarified.

---

### REFERENCES

1. Cooper SA, Allan L, Greenlaw N et al. Rates, causes, place and predictors of mortality in adults with intellectual disabilities with and without Down syndrome: cohort study with record linkage. *BMJ Open* 2020; 10: e036465. [CrossRef]
2. Helsedirektoratet. Gode helse-og omsorgstjenester til personer med utviklingshemming. <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/veiledere/gode-helse-og-omsorgstjenester-til-personer-med-utviklingshemming> Accessed 24.5.2023.
3. Olsen MI, Søndena E, Langballe EM et al. Use of health and dental care services in adults with intellectual disability in relation to age and intellectual disability levels. *J Intellect Dev Disabil* 2022; 48: 172–83. [CrossRef]
4. Olsen MI. Physical performance, physical and perceived health, and the use of healthcare services in a population of adults with intellectual disability. Doktoravhandling. Tromsø: Det helsevitenskapelige fakultet, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2022. <https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/25106> Accessed 24.5.2023.
5. Cooper SA, McLean G, Guthrie B et al. Multiple physical and mental health comorbidity in adults with intellectual disabilities: population-based cross-sectional analysis. *BMC Fam Pract* 2015; 16: 110. [CrossRef]

6. Sparby LE, Olsvold N, Obstfelder A. Mediating the interface between voluntariness and coercion: A qualitative study of learning disability nurses' work in medical examinations of people with intellectual disability. *J Clin Nurs* 2020; 29: 1539–51. [CrossRef]

7. Nasjonalt senter for aldring og helse. Mitt sykehuspass. <https://www.aldringoghelse.no/aldring/utviklingshemning/helse-og-sykdom/mitt-sykehuspass-2/> Accessed 10.5.2023.

---

Publisert: 26 June 2023. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.23.0303

Received 23.4.2023, accepted 24.5.2023.

Copyright: © Tidsskriftet 2026 Downloaded from tidsskriftet.no 27 March 2026.