

Frequently asked questions about health

I love the winter coming on as it is much easier to do exercise in the cooler weather. How is your exercise program going? Are you up to half an hour per day yet? Also how is the weight going? Remember that having the correct weight is important for health as well as fitness. If you have had a few break downs in wrong food choices, don't give up but get back on the wagon of skinny foods. When you go shopping for groceries think about everything you put in the trolley and ask: Is this healthy? Is this good for me? Is it going to help me lose weight? Is this a low fat version? I reckon the answer should be yes to all four questions nearly all the time.

But enough nagging on diet and exercise! To change the topic, I am going to put in some questions that some of my patients with Down syndrome, their families, GPs or support workers have asked me. I will try to answer them as best I can... if you have any further comments or questions you can ask me for more detail.

1. From someone's mother

Question: My daughter is slow in the mornings and complains of a headache. What's going on? Could her thyroid be underactive?

Answer: The symptoms of being slow in the morning with irritability suggest to me something called sleep apnea. Sleep problems occur in up to one-two thirds of adults with Down syndrome, and not only that, the older you are the more likely you are to get it. To breathe properly you need to have air go in through your throat, and in the brain also there is a part which keeps telling you to breath. Sleep apnea means that through the night you stop breathing maybe dozens of times for shortish bursts, but then quickly wake up and then start breathing again then fall asleep almost immediately. But you do all this and have all this interrupted sleep without really knowing it. This means you get a bad night's sleep and feel rotten in the morning. You stop breathing because there is a bit of a blockage to the air in your throat, or the breathing centre in the brain does not work properly at night. T's mother is right, however, in that an underactive thyroid could also cause some slowing and tiredness too.

I would suggest a visit to your doctor and talk about getting a thyroid check and sleep study - lots of fun when you have a special room to yourself with your own TV and the nurses check your breathing all night. Sometimes a mask which helps the air get in may be recommended but it is most important to make sure you are not overweight too.

2. From someone's Doctor

Question: I have a 32 year old female patient with Down syndrome. Should she have a Pap smear? How do I prepare her for this?

Answer: If this patient is now or ever has been sexually active, yes she does need two yearly Pap smears, according to Australian guidelines. This test does not hurt but it involves looking at private parts of the body and can be quite frightening for any woman. The Family Planning Association at Fortitude Valley has a special unit to help prepare women to have these tests. I would recommend that his patient visit them first. If his patient has never had sexual intercourse, Pap smears are not needed. Sometimes women patients also prefer women doctors to do these tests.

3. From a couple

Question: Does having Down syndrome mean that they are unable to have a family?

Answer: This is a complicated question and it took me some time to go through all the different parts with this couple. Getting married and having kids is a big deal for everyone, and some people decide not to have kids. For example, I don't have kids... because I can't cook and I don't like too much noise! There are many things to talk about in this question asked by this couple, such as being in love, being in a long term relationship, what it means to get married, sexual feelings, managing the household and bills, is pregnancy possible, contraception, could we look after children on our own or with help, will our child have Down syndrome, and so on. These are things to talk about together and with other people close to you which may include your family and again, Family Planning Queensland is very helpful.

I will just talk about getting pregnant

At least half of women with Down syndrome have normal period cycles, ovulate and are fertile. Between 35 and 50 percent of children born to mothers with Down syndrome have trisomy 21 or other disabilities. Men with Down syndrome have a much lower fertility rate compared to men without Down syndrome, but there are a couple of reported cases of men with Down syndrome fathering children.

If this couple do not want children, they should use contraception. There are several types but this is another topic.

4. From a man with Down syndrome

Question: How do I stop eating all the time? I love lollies.

Answer: Mmmm, this is a hard one. My John (not my child but my husband) has just the same problem. There is no easy way to lose weight, and it is hard to eat sensibly all the time. My thoughts are to eat healthily most of but not all the time; for examples have a treat once per week only, instead of every day. So I say to John that he does not have to stop eating his favourite things all the time. When we go shopping, we just don't buy certain yummy but fat things all the time; for example if we buy chips, then we eat them straight away - so we now only buy them once per month; also we buy smaller packets instead of large packets, we buy low fat or no fat choices where possible.

The next thing we do is exercise (there I go again on the usual topic...) most days we do at least half an hour... occasionally don't make it as too tired... but sometimes we do over an hour. We do other things during the day too - make sure that what you do during the day is enjoyable and stimulating for you. Boredom is really bad for the tummy. Sometimes, it is just plain hard work to say NO and so you have to learn to be strong too. Reward yourself for saying 'no thanks' by feeling proud of yourself going to the pictures or buying a CD.

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