This article explores the effectiveness of health checks for people with learning disabilities in identifying unmet health needs.

Health checks for people with learning disabilities

People with learning disabilities have poorer health than their non-disabled peers and evidence suggests that this is partly because of barriers associated with identifying ill health and ensuring timely access to healthcare services (Michael, 2008).

Current advice

The Department of Health (2009) recommends that primary care services provide comprehensive annual health checks for people with learning disabilities using local or directly enhanced schemes (tinyurl.com/DH-enhanced-services). Local authorities should help to identify individuals who would benefit from and would be eligible for enhanced services.

It is recognised that undertaking comprehensive annual health checks will require considerable effort by primary care staff; therefore, the DH advises that primary care services ensure the availability of resources including support from specialist learning disability community teams as appropriate. In addition, learning disability awareness training for mainstream health professionals should be supported.

New evidence

A systematic review summarised the available evidence for the impact of health checks on the health and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities (Robertson et al, 2011).

A total of 38 publications were identified. These involved checking the health of more than 5,000 people with learning disabilities from a range of countries including a full range of people with learning disabilities.

Three of the studies found were randomised controlled trials, one had a non-randomised matched control group, but the majority were looking at the outcome of clinical interventions. The studies consistently showed that there were unmet health needs in people with learning disabilities presenting for health checks. Despite this positive finding, the authors urge caution as the evidence is mainly from small-scale studies.

However, they conclude that health checks are effective in identifying previously unrecognised health needs, including life-threatening conditions. Future research should consider strategies for optimising the cost-effectiveness or efficiency of health checks.

Annual checks need considerable resources and are likely to benefit people with learning disabilities. The studies found were small-scale studies and therefore underpowered to identify significant differences. However, the evidence is consistent with the finding that health checks are effective in identifying previously unrecognised health needs, including life-threatening conditions. Further research should consider strategies for optimising the cost-effectiveness or efficiency of health checks.

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