



Health Complications associated with Down syndrome

The life expectancy of a person with Down syndrome in 1950 was 15 years of age. Today, as a result of major advances in medical science – heart surgery, immunisation and the use of antibiotics – life expectancy has increased to age 55/ 60.

However, certain health problems are common:

Congenital Heart Defect: Around 1 in 3 babies born with Down syndrome will have a congenital heart defect. Although some will heal themselves most require surgery and long term monitoring.

Hypothyroidism (under active thyroid) The affects of this condition result in excessive tiredness, lack of concentration, weight gain, dry coarse skin, memory problems and intolerance of cold.

Leukaemia: Approx one in hundred children develop leukaemia between the ages of one and four

Upper Respiratory Tract Infections: Children with Down syndrome are prone to coughs, colds and ear infections due to their relatively narrow ear and nasal passages. Older people are also more susceptible to chronic respiratory conditions.

Atlanto-axial Instability: There is increased mobility of the two bones directly under the skull (atlas and axis), which in extreme cases can become compressed. Cord compression can happen gradually or rapidly causing dislocation and even paralysis. The annual physical examination should include a check for signs of cord compression (neck pain, restricted neck movement, unsteadiness in walking and deterioration in bowel and bladder control).

Ears: Ear infections, such as glue ear, are a recurrent problem in children with Down syndrome. Treatment for glue ear involves the insertion of grommets. Generally, hearing in people with Down syndrome should be monitored regularly throughout life.

Eyes: Squints are very common and need to be corrected through the use of glasses or surgery. Cataracts are common in almost 50% of people with Down syndrome and are treatable if identified early. In general, regular eye check-ups are advised.

Muscle Tone: Very poor in infants and can cause problems with sucking and weight gain.

Dental: milk teeth erupt earlier and stay longer making gum disease more common. Regular dental checks advised.

For more information contact:

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