

Helping Children with Heart Problems Learn and Grow

This handout discusses how to care for your child with heart problems.

Most children with congenital heart disease (CHD) lead long, productive lives. They may need complex surgeries and long hospital stays. However, they develop normally.

Some children can have problems with their development. The problems can be physical, mental and social. These are neurodevelopmental impairments. If unnoticed, they make it hard for your child to reach their full potential. You and your child's doctors can work as a team to identify these issues early. Together, you can create a plan to help your child.

Symptoms

Children with CHD may have:

- Delays in crawling or walking
- Eating difficulties
- Communication problems
- Planning & organization problems
- Anxiety or depression
- ADHD

Some problems are clear early on. Others may be hard to notice. Some may not appear until middle school or high school.

Testing

We offer developmental evaluations. This helps to spot delays in development early. From there, we will team up with you to create a plan to help your child achieve their full potential.

How CHD Changes Neurodevelopment

Every child is different. CHD is not the same for everyone. Ask your child's cardiologist about your child's heart.

Some heart problems change the way blood flows to a baby's brain. This can slow down brain growth before the baby is born.

Some heart problems cause low oxygen levels. Low oxygen levels can affect energy levels and development.

Surgeries, long hospital stays, and frequent doctor's visits can disrupt daily baby activities like eating, cuddles, and tummy time. They also disrupt childhood routines and school time. They can change the relationship between the child and parent(s).

Some genetic mutations change both how the heart works and how the brain works.

Types of Care and Support

Some children may need:

- Medical care like feeding tubes
- Therapies such as:
 - Physical therapy
 - Occupational therapy
 - Speech therapy
- Mental health support or counselling
- Medicine to help treat ADHD, anxiety or depression
- School and other support services

How to Help

You can help your child grow and develop.

- See your doctor regularly before your baby is born
- Deliver your baby close to their due date to allow their brain to develop.
- Talk, sing and read to your child to let them hear your voice
- Talk with your care team about how to safely play with, touch, and cuddle your child
- Encourage your child to be active

- Ask for neurodevelopmental screening if:
 - Your child had low oxygen levels or heart-lung bypass before age one
 - You're worried
- Talk to your child's teacher if you have concerns about your child's grades or behavior

Our Services

UW Health Kids provides services from before birth until adulthood. These include:

- Making a birth plan for your baby to be delivered safely
- Planning surgeries to reduce risk
- Working with you to help bond and reduce trauma during hospital stays
- Family support through child life specialists, health psychologists and social workers
- Occupational, physical, and speech therapy services
- Neurodevelopmental evaluations
- Neuropsychology testing
- School support and advocacy

Next Steps

For More Information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



HealthyChildren.org



Cardiac Neurodevelopmental Outcomes Collaborative



Conquering Congenital Heart Disease



Camp Odayin



Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 4/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#8421