

Guide for Working With Students With Chronic Health Impairments

The purpose of this guide is to assist school teams in identifying the educational needs of students with chronic health conditions and related functional impairments, and in developing successful school re-entry plans.

Chronic Health Conditions That May Affect School Participation

Many medical conditions can contribute to chronic symptoms, fatigue, pain or functional difficulties in children and adolescents, including:

- Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)
- Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS)
- Functional Neurological Disorder (FND)
- Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS)
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue conditions
- Long COVID
- Pain or functional difficulties following illness, surgery, concussion or injury

Although these conditions vary medically, many students experience similar functional challenges that can significantly impact school participation and daily activities.

Common Characteristics of Chronic Health Conditions

Students with chronic health conditions may experience:

- Symptoms that fluctuate throughout the day or week
- Reduced physical, cognitive or emotional endurance
- Increased effort required to complete everyday tasks
- Variability in functioning and school performance
- Difficulty sustaining attendance, participation or workload over time

Many chronic health conditions are considered “invisible disabilities,” meaning a student may appear well while still experiencing significant symptoms or functional limitations.

Impact of Chronic Health Impairments on Academics

Chronic health impairments can negatively impact a student’s ability to attend school on a regular basis. These



students may report increased symptoms (pain, fatigue, dizziness) when attempting physical or cognitive tasks that require functioning beyond their current capacity.

This can inadvertently lead to increased avoidance of stressful situations. Students with chronic health impairments may be late to school, frequently ask to go to the nurse or leave school early.

Students may also experience anxiety or depression that can affect school participation and symptom management. Those returning after hospitalization or extended illness may experience additional anxiety related to school re-entry.

Other challenges may include:

- Attention or concentration difficulties
- Sleep disruption
- Cognitive fatigue or fogginess
- Falling behind academically
- Decreased stamina or weakness or initiation
- Increased frustration, helplessness or hopelessness
- Memory difficulties

Planning for School Re-Entry

Have a plan. Students may benefit from a Section 504 Plan or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) when returning to school.

Start gradually. A gradual re-entry may be recommended. Temporary adjustments to schedule, workload, attendance or instructional supports can help students successfully resume participation. Plans should be flexible and responsive to changes in symptoms and endurance.

Meet regularly. Students may benefit from regular check-ins with a guidance counselor or another trusted staff member to monitor adjustment and provide support.

Helping Students Cope With Chronic Symptoms

School staff should generally interact with returning students in the same manner as their peers, while supporting the use of coping strategies and participation in daily activities.

If symptoms can be redirected, students should be encouraged to remain engaged in school activities rather than leaving class, going home early or contacting caregivers. However, if symptoms appear unrelated to the student's chronic condition or indicate a potential medical concern, staff should assess the situation as they would for any student and notify caregivers when appropriate.

Additional suggestions include:

Refrain and redirect. Avoid making symptoms the primary focus of conversation. Briefly acknowledge concerns, then redirect students toward coping strategies, participation and task completion.

Structure breaks. Students may benefit from scheduled, time-limited breaks throughout the day. Encourage use of coping strategies and consider locations other than the nurse's office when appropriate.

Take it day by day. Students will have good and difficult days. During more challenging periods, they may require additional encouragement, support and redirection.

Provide positive reinforcement. Offer specific praise for effort, attendance, participation, use of coping skills and completion of challenging tasks.

Functional Rehabilitation of Chronic Health Impairments Program

The Functional Rehabilitation of Chronic Health Impairments Program at Kennedy Krieger Institute serves children and adolescents whose medical conditions have resulted in functional disability.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, the program helps students:

- Develop coping strategies for managing symptoms
- Increase participation in daily activities through gradual skill building
- Successfully return to school, home and community life

Successful school reintegration often requires collaboration among healthcare providers, families and educators.

In a school setting, a similar support team may include:

- Administrator
- General or special educator
- Guidance counselor
- Nurse
- Psychologist
- Social worker

It may be helpful to identify a trusted school staff member to serve as the student's point person. Regular communication between the school team, caregivers and healthcare providers can support successful reintegration and long-term participation.

CONTACT US

Specialized Health Needs Interagency Collaboration at Kennedy Krieger Institute

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call **443-923-9400**, or call toll-free at **888-554-2080**. TTY users, please contact us at **443-923-2645**, or dial **711** to make a Maryland Relay call.

KennedyKrieger.org/SHNIC

Program Location

1750 E. Fairmount Ave. • Baltimore, MD 21231

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