

FUNCTIONAL NEUROLOGICAL DISORDER

Background

Functional neurological disorder (FND) is a highly disabling disorder caused by a dysfunction of the nervous system and an unconscious loop of abnormal response(s). FND is not related to damage to the brain's structure but rather a disruption to the brain's communication pathways. The neurological symptoms cannot be explained by a neurological disease or condition and are not related to a structural disease such as multiple sclerosis or stroke. A range of motor and sensory symptoms result as areas of the brain struggle to communicate with each other. FND can affect the ability to think, move, feel, speak, swallow, see or hear.

The exact cause of FND is unknown although research indicates different predisposing factors making some individuals more susceptible. FND often but not always is diagnosed with a co-occurring neurological condition such as anxiety, mood disorder, or chronic pain. Symptoms of FND can be triggered by stressors such as pain, fatigue, or stress.

Students with FND can experience a wide range and combination of symptoms that are physical, sensory and/or cognitive. Students with FND may experience substantial or even complete remission followed by sudden relapses of symptoms. These symptoms are reflexive and occur unconsciously.

Motor function, posture, and balance may be affected by extremity weakness or paralysis. The student may also experience tremors, spasms, and muscle twitching. Changes in speech (e.g., slurring, stuttering, difficulty swallowing), hearing, and vision (e.g., loss of vision, double vision) may also occur. Additional sensory dysfunction may occur related to altered sensations (e.g., numbness, tingling, pain, inability to sense touch).

Students with FND may experience other co-occurring physical and psychological conditions that include chronic pain, fatigue, sleep problems, memory issues, bowel and bladder problems, anxiety, depression, and psychogenic nonepileptic episodes (PNEE).



Top Takeaways for School Considerations

Functional neurological disorder (FND) is a developmental health concern that can interfere with a student's physical, sensory and/or cognitive function.

The student can experience a range of neurologic symptoms despite all the basic building blocks of the nervous system (brain, spinal cord, nerves, muscles) having intact and normal function.

FND is a complex disease. The student is not feigning or faking the event and symptoms aren't something the student can control.

When the student is experiencing symptoms, do not panic. Maintain safety while avoid drawing attention to the student. Limiting verbal and physical interactions with the student during an episode is important.

Students should be encouraged to return to the activity in which they were previously involved as soon as possible following an episode, though a brief break may be needed.

School staff should be educated on the student's learned or preferred coping strategies (e.g., mindfulness, deep breathing, distraction).

Students may experience difficulties with both memory, concentration, and decreased stamina. Students may also report increased pain when presented with a physical or cognitive task they find demanding.

Kennedy Krieger Institute's Specialized Health Needs Interagency Collaboration

The Specialized Health Needs Interagency Collaboration (SHNIC) program is a collaborative partnership between the Kennedy Krieger Institute and the Maryland State Department of Education.



Kennedy Krieger Institute

Considerations for the Individualized Healthcare Plan (IHP)

- Nursing diagnosis of risk for falls, risk for injury, fatigue, impaired thought process and risk for disturbed sensory perception
- Current diagnosed health condition including date of diagnosis, progress of disease process and other chronic health conditions
- Current medication and treatment orders (consider schedule, equipment needs and side effects)
- Student-specific triggers, avoidance, or intervention strategies (e.g., touch, light, sound, smell)
- Activity, positioning, transferring (consider precautions and/or restrictions)
- Consider emergency care plan(s) (ECP) and emergency evacuation plan(s) (EEP) as related to medical needs in the school setting, and staff education/training, as appropriate

Discussion Starters for Educational Team

1. Has the school staff been trained to implement the student-specific emergency plan?
2. Would the student benefit from evaluations or assessments in any of the following areas: physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, assistive technology, adapted physical education, functional behavior, psychology, hearing and vision?
3. Would the student benefit from additional academic support and/or modified education (e.g., copies of notes, extra time, reduced workload, simplified instructions, alternative formats for presentation of material, 504/IEP)?
4. Does the student need additional adult support to access the academic curriculum in the least restrictive environment?
5. Does the classroom environment support the student's needs and/or equipment (e.g., desk/seating options, maneuverability space, electrical outlets, flash pass for bathroom or nurse)?
6. Can rest breaks, safe spaces, or reduced stimulation times be built into the student's schedule?
7. Would schedule flexibility support the student?

Resources

Kennedy Krieger Institute: Neurology
kennedykrieger.org

Functional Neurological Disorder Society
fndsociety.org/

FND Action
fndaction.org.uk/what-is-functional-neurological-disorder/

FND Hope Functional Neurological Disorder
fndhope.org/



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