

Fatal

Five

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The Fatal Five refers to the top five disorders linked to preventable deaths of individuals in congregate care settings, or in community-based residential settings. While the issues can differ in order of frequency depending on the population represented, the five conditions most likely to result in death or health deterioration for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities are (1) bowel obstruction, (2) gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), (3) aspiration, (4) dehydration, and (5) seizures (6) Sepsis (7) Knowing When to Act.

### **(1) Bowel Obstruction**

This is the most common cause of preventable death in community settings. The most important root cause of bowel obstruction is the use of multiple drugs with constipating side effects. Add to this the effect of dietary habits that contribute to the problem, such as diets that are low in fiber and fluids. Ironically, medications intended to improve elimination can place the individual at higher risk for impaired bowel function. Adequate active movement or exercise is also important. Controlling these factors, and training caretakers to recognize the signs and symptoms of bowel problems at the earliest moment, can greatly reduce occurrence of death from bowel obstruction.

### **(2) Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)**

GERD is the backing-up of stomach contents, including acid, into the esophagus. It often goes undiagnosed in an individual, including those without disabilities, until major harm has been done to the bottom of the esophagus. Medications that cause constipation also contribute to GERD. Individuals who are overweight -- particularly when they carry excess weight around the abdomen or wear clothing that is too tight -- have a higher risk of GERD. Ill-advised dietary choices, immobility, and improper positioning also contribute greatly to the incidence. As the disorder continues without treatment, the occurrence of discreet or frank aspiration, life-threatening GI bleeding, and esophageal cancer become more common.

### **(3) Aspiration**

Aspiration is the most common cause of death in institutional settings, including nursing homes and large group care settings for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Aspiration often begins subtly and damages increasing areas of the lungs. Aspiration pneumonia is a common discharge diagnosis following hospitalization. Other factors which may lead to aspiration are poor body positioning, particularly in individuals who cannot control their own movements well, and behavioral issues related to eating.

### **(4) Dehydration**

Individuals who do not swallow well are especially likely to refuse fluids or indicate fear when they get them, often resulting in dehydration. Dehydration is also likely when staff or family try to restrict fluids to prevent incontinence, not realizing that lack of fluids can contribute to constipation and increase seizure frequency, not to mention drug toxicity and other health problems. Dehydration is more prevalent in the hot summer months

### **(5) Seizures**

Seizure deaths can occur from drug toxicity or from uncontrolled seizure. Sudden, unexplained death in epilepsy (SUDEP), occurs on a regular basis and for reasons that medical science has yet to explain. Life expectancy for persons with active seizure disorders has shown to be up to 10 years less than those without the condition.

## **(6) Sepsis**

Sepsis is more prone with people who are older or very young, have an immune system disorder, and people with Intellectual Disorders. Symptoms are usually increase temp, pulse, and respirations, chills, a decreased blood pressure and changes in level of consciousness. The best prevention is to avoid over-use of antibiotics, know the people you serve, and if in doubt, send them out.

## **(7) Knowing When to Act**

Community care givers must know the people they work with and understands the signs and symptoms of potential health problems. Nurses and Direct Care personnel should have open communication, have a plan to deal with emergency's, and a level of confidence in each other. The key is safety. Safety first, safety last, safety always. When in doubt-send them out.