



Information for teachers

The aim of this fact sheet is to give you information on congenital heart conditions and how they may affect children at school.

Congenital heart conditions

Congenital means 'from birth'. Congenital heart conditions are abnormalities of the heart that are present from birth.

In the UK, one in every 133 babies is born with a heart condition. There are many different heart conditions, some much more serious than others. Every child with a heart condition is different and will have different needs and abilities.

Managing at school the needs of children with heart conditions

Most children with simple heart conditions will not need any special care at school. However, those with more complicated heart conditions may have extra needs that you should be aware of.

It is important that you identify the needs of a child with a heart condition and draw up appropriate plans and systems for supporting them. Many schools find that it is essential to build a strong partnership with the parents and the cardiac liaison nurse.

Cardiac liaison nurses (CLNs) are trained to advise teachers on meeting a child's needs. They will be happy to talk to you and may be able to visit the school.

Signs to be aware of

Some children with heart conditions may show symptoms that you should be aware of. These may include the following.

- e Breathlessness – some children with heart conditions will have less oxygen in their blood than healthy children. This can cause them to become breathless more quickly. When children become breathless their lips and skin may take on a bluish tinge (cyanosis). Children with these symptoms will need to rest often and may need to limit the amount of physical activity they do.
- e Increased tiredness – some children with heart conditions are likely to get tired more quickly than healthy children and will need to rest.
- e Increased susceptibility to infections – some children with heart conditions are more susceptible to infections such as flu, bronchitis and pneumonia.

Other factors to be aware of

Cold weather

In cold weather some heart children may become breathless quickly. To avoid this, they may need to stay in a warm place during breaks, lunch periods, or during outdoor sports activities.



Exercise

Some children with heart conditions may get tired quickly when exercising. They may also be restricted in the type of physical activity they can do. It is important to get advice from the child's parents, cardiac liaison nurse or cardiologist on what exercise the child can do. If they cannot take part in normal physical activities, you will need to plan other appropriate activities.

Medicines

Some children will be taking medicine for their condition. It is important that you are aware of these medicines, what they do and any side effects.

It may be useful to draw up a health care plan with parents if the child needs medication while at school. Although schools do not have to give medication to children, the Department for Education and Skills does advise schools to: "Develop effective management systems to support individual children with medical needs who require access to their medicines while in school" (Managing medicines in schools and early years settings, DfES March 2005).

Some medicines have side effects that may affect children with heart conditions at school. For example

- Diuretics – these help to get rid of excess fluid. It is likely that children on diuretics will need frequent and possibly urgent trips to the toilet.
- Anticoagulants – these are blood-thinning medicines for children who are in danger of getting blood clots. Children on this medicine will need to take care not to get bruised. This means that they will not be able to take part in rough playground games and contact sports (for example, football, judo, hockey, and so on).

After an operation

After surgery, most children with heart conditions normally need about two to four weeks to recover and can return to school after that. However, some children will have more complicated conditions and may need many months to recover during which home tuition may need to be arranged.

When a child has been in hospital for a long time, the return to school life can be difficult for them. They may find it difficult to concentrate for long periods, feel tired and still be traumatised from the hospital experience. Parents may also be worried about the reaction of their child's classmates when they return to school. You may find it useful to discuss these issues with the parents to come up with solutions on how best to handle the child's return to school.

What to do in an emergency

It is important that you have contact details for the child's parents, GP and cardiac liaison nurse.

More information

The Department for Children, Schools and Families has more information on children with special needs and medical needs.

- www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen
- www.dfes.gov.uk/sickchildren
- 'Managing Medicines in Schools and Early Years Settings' – (March 2005). Available from <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/>

Evidence and sources of information for this CHF information sheet can be obtained at:

- (1) The Health Conditions in Schools Alliance. London. 2017. Available at: www.medicalconditionsatschool.org.uk

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Caring for children with heart conditions

Information sheet



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