



Communicating with people with learning disabilities

Information for Staff



In partnership with Mencap, Leeds and Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust.

What is a learning disability

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life. People with a learning disability are more likely to have difficulties speaking, understanding, and to have additional impairments with hearing, sight and mobility.

People with a mild to moderate learning disability often have good communication skills, but may need a little more time and support to reply. It will help to keep your questions short and use easily understood words where possible.

Many people with more severe learning disabilities may also have reasonable communication skills, given time and support. People with profound and multiple learning disabilities may have little or no speech or understanding, but they may still communicate in ways which a carer can explain to you. The number of people with no communication skills at all is quite small.

A patient may not realise how important it is to tell you if they have a learning disability. It is vital for you to keep this possibility in mind so that patients receive the best healthcare and support. For example, if a patient has impaired speech or behaviour because of an unrecognised learning disability, this could be confused with other medical conditions or being under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

If you are not sure, you should ask if the patient has any other disability or impairment they can tell you about. Please use this terminology rather than words like 'mental handicap', which are old-fashioned and can cause offence. Some people may not wish or be able to tell you if they have a learning disability. If they have difficulty communicating, this guide may still help.

Health and Hospital Passports and Card Scheme

A growing number of people with a learning disability now have their own accessible health information in a health or hospital passport, or health action plan, which they keep at home. In some areas, people use card-carrying schemes such as VIP cards and Safe Place cards. These can contain helpful medical and contact information, as well as information about the patient's wishes and their communication needs.

Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust | The Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS Trust

Red Amber Green

Hospital Assessment

Really important information you need to know about me

My Name is:

If I have to go to hospital the best people to go with me, it gives hospital staff important information about me.

It needs to be at the end of my bed and a copy should be put in my notes.

Please read my Traffic Light Hospital Assessment - it will only take a few minutes!

My carers would be happy to answer any questions. You can ring them on:



Capacity and Consent

You must make reasonable adjustments to ensure that each person has the same opportunity for health, whether or not they have a learning disability (Equality Act 2010, formerly the Disability Discrimination Act 2005).

Capacity is specific to a particular decision and time. You must assume the person has capacity. If assessment shows that they do not, a decision must be made in their best interests, in line with the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

Everyone has a right to expect and receive appropriate healthcare (Human Rights Act 1998).

Hospital Admissions

Please tell the hospital if you think the patient has a learning disability. Most hospitals have specialist staff and other measures to improve the care of patients with a learning disability.

Finding the best way to communicate

Some people with a learning disability may not use symbols to communicate, or may be unfamiliar with them. If communication is difficult, it is always useful to show this booklet to people and ask if they would like to use the symbols. Allow the patient to choose whether they need them, but above all listen to the person, pay attention to facial expressions and notice gestures and body language.

The Learning Disability Helpline, run by Mencap, is a free, national advice and information service for people with learning disabilities, their carers and professionals. The details for this service are on the back cover of this guide.

Top Tips for Communication

- 1.** Reassure the patient – a friendly face is important for everyone, but particularly for patients with a learning disability who may become more anxious or agitated in a stressful situation.
- 2.** Respect people's personal space – some people may be alarmed by close physical contact so it is best to explain what will happen and ensure they are happy about this, before it happens.
- 3.** Use easy words and actions to describe what you or the patient needs to do. Keep your questions short and simple.
- 4.** Direct your questions to the patient whenever possible.
- 5.** Ask about the patient's disability, other conditions or impairments, and if appropriate, whether they would find the symbols in this guide helpful.
- 6.** Allow more time for the patient to respond during patient assessment.
- 7.** It is fine to ask parents or carers for their help, as long as the patient feels you are also speaking to them.
- 8.** Check the patient understands what you are saying – eg "Your leg hurts? Is that right?"
- 9.** Watch the person – they may use their body language and facial expressions to tell you something.
- 10.** Use gestures and facial expressions eg if you are asking if someone is in pain make your facial expression unhappy to reinforce what you are saying.

Symbols section

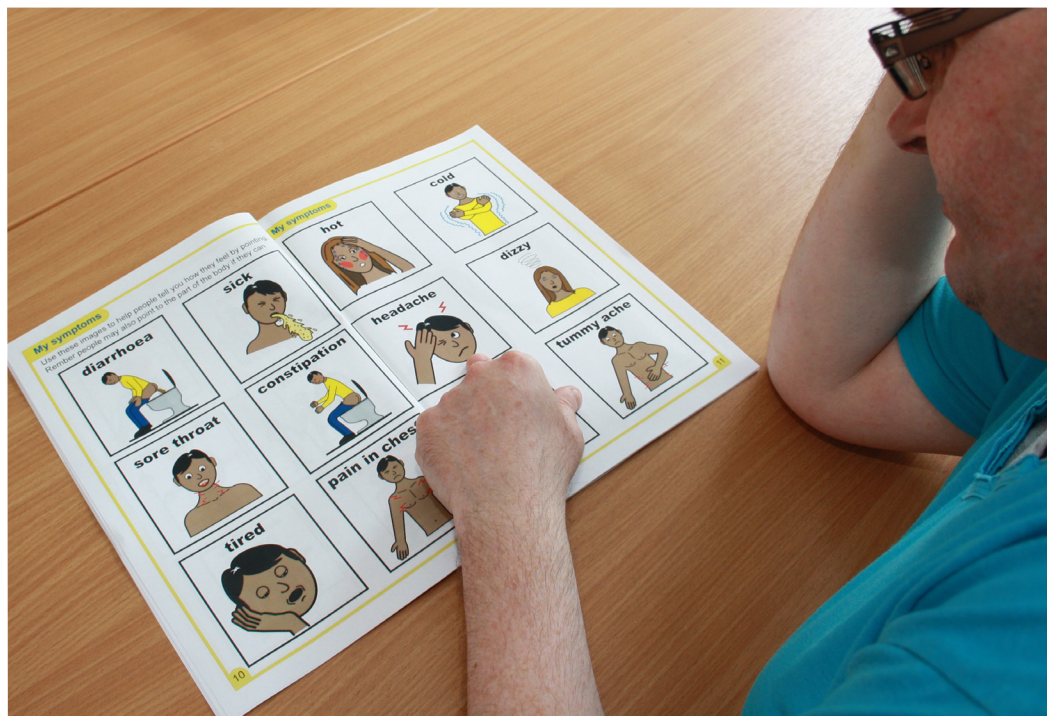
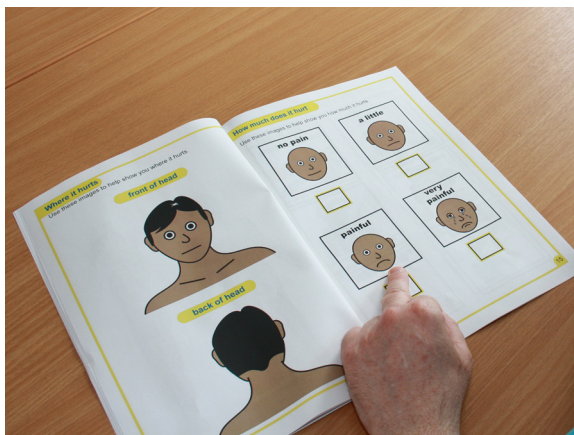
How to use the symbols

- You can point to the symbol whilst speaking to a patient if they do not seem to understand you. The images may make what you are saying easier for them to understand.
- Remember to speak the word whilst pointing to the symbols.



How to use the symbols

- For some patients, symbols may be their preferred or only method of communication. They will point to symbols to tell you something or to answer a question.
- If someone points to a symbol, say what the symbol is they have pointed to. This is to make sure that they have understood what information you have asked for. You can use this to ask more questions about the things you need to know.



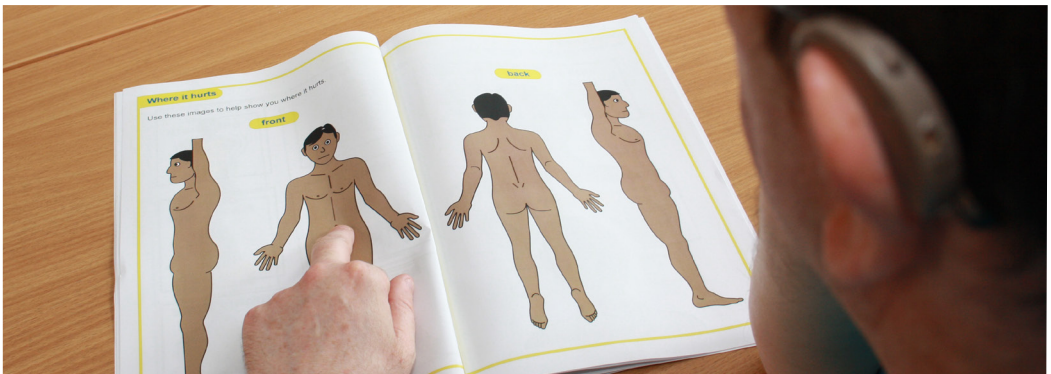
Examples of how to use the symbols

- If you were trying to find out about where someone lived, you could point to the 'address' symbol. The patient may be able to verbally tell you this information. If they are unable to do this, you could point to the 'family' symbol to ask if the patient lives with family. Remember that it may take a long time for someone to answer you, and you may need to point to the 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know' symbols. You may need to point to the 'carer' or 'friend' symbols to find out more about where a person lives and who supports them.
- There are a lot of symbols around the symptoms people might be feeling. A patient may be able to point to some to describe what is wrong with them. If they cannot tell you how they feel, you can point to the symbols and watch for a patient's reaction. Remember to point to the symbols slowly so they have time to think about what you have said.
- Even where someone seems to understand what you are saying, you can use symbols to make a patient more aware of what may happen to them, such as the ones in the 'What we need to do next' section. These provide a picture of what a patient can expect and reassure them.



How to use the body maps

- Use the body maps with a patient so they can point to where they are hurting. Body maps are helpful for patients if they do not know how to describe the area which hurts, or because it is personal.
- If a patient points to a leg or an arm, they may not be pointing to the one that hurts. They may not be able to distinguish between the right and left side of the body eg if they point to an arm, ask them if it is their arm that hurts and point to their arm to find out which one is hurting.



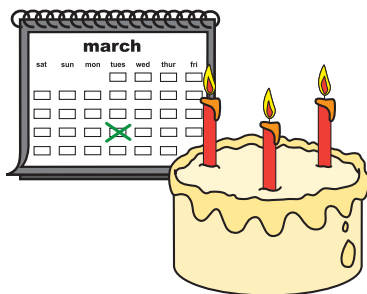
About Me

You can use this page to try and find out details about someone, such as their name or where they live.

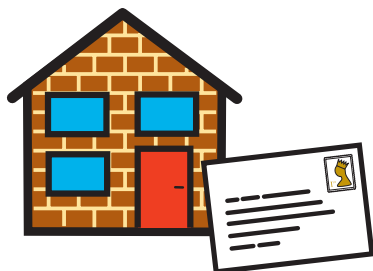
name



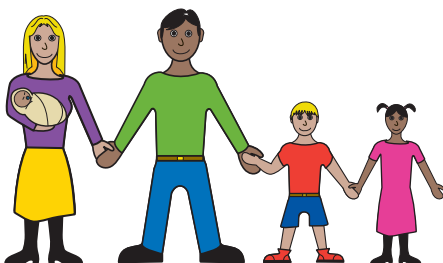
date of birth



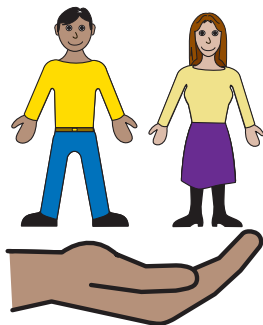
address



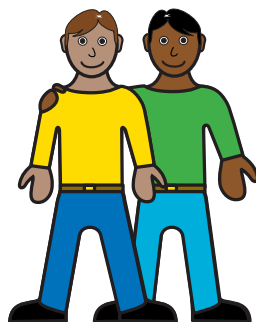
family

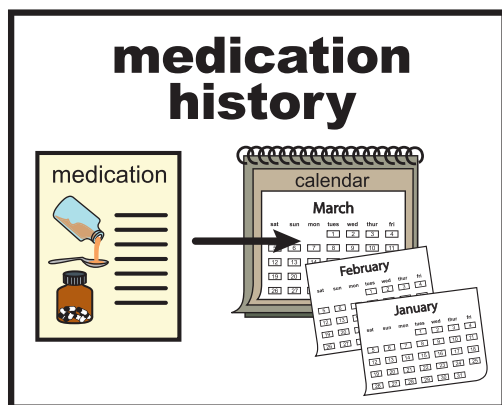


carer



friend





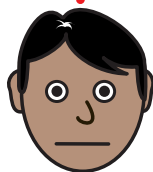
Questions

Use these symbols to help patients answer questions you have asked by pointing to them. Remember they might still be able to nod or shake their head.

yes



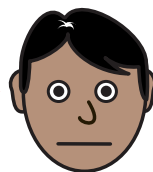
yes



no



no



sometimes

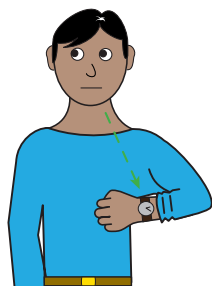


don't know

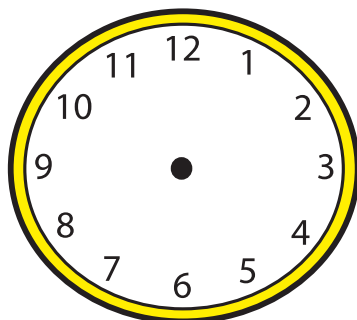


Questions

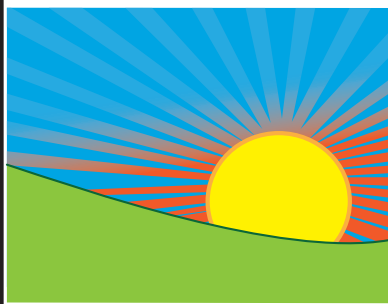
what time?



time



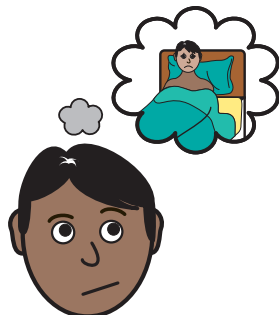
morning



night



before



falling



My Symptoms

Use these images to help patients tell you how they feel by pointing to them. Remember they may also point to the part of the body if they can.

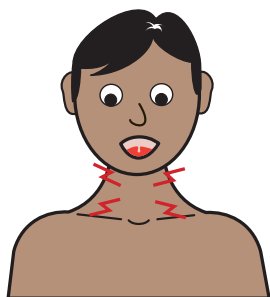
diarrhoea



sick



sore throat



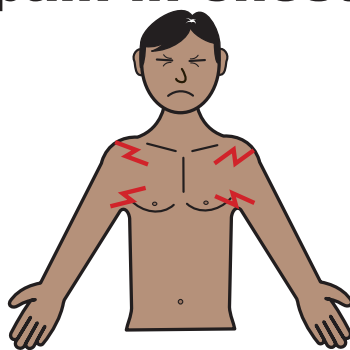
constipation



tired

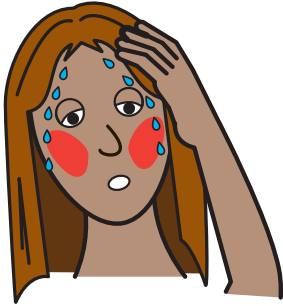


pain in chest



My Symptoms

hot



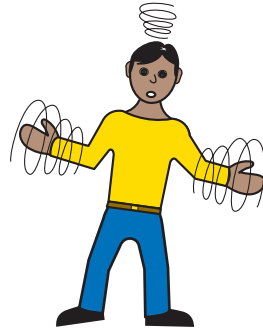
cold



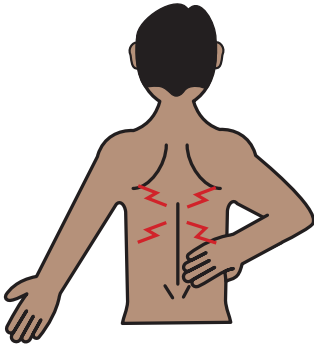
headache



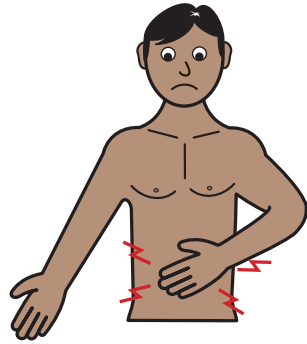
dizzy



backache



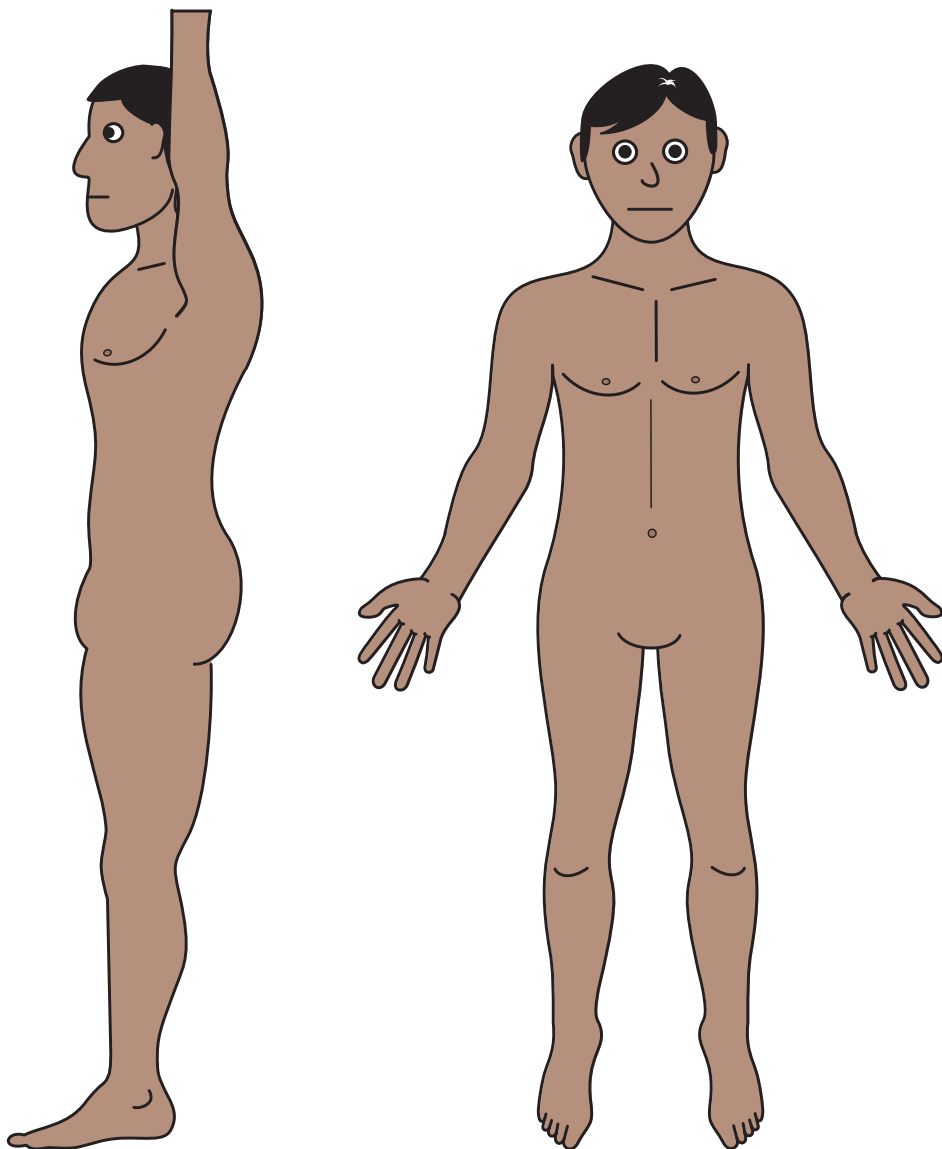
tummy ache



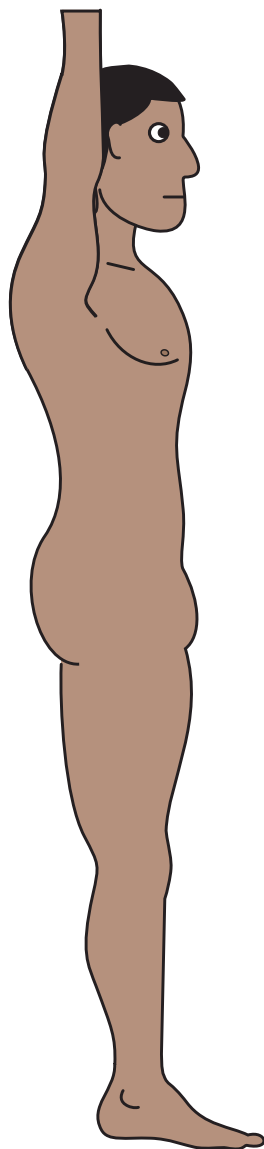
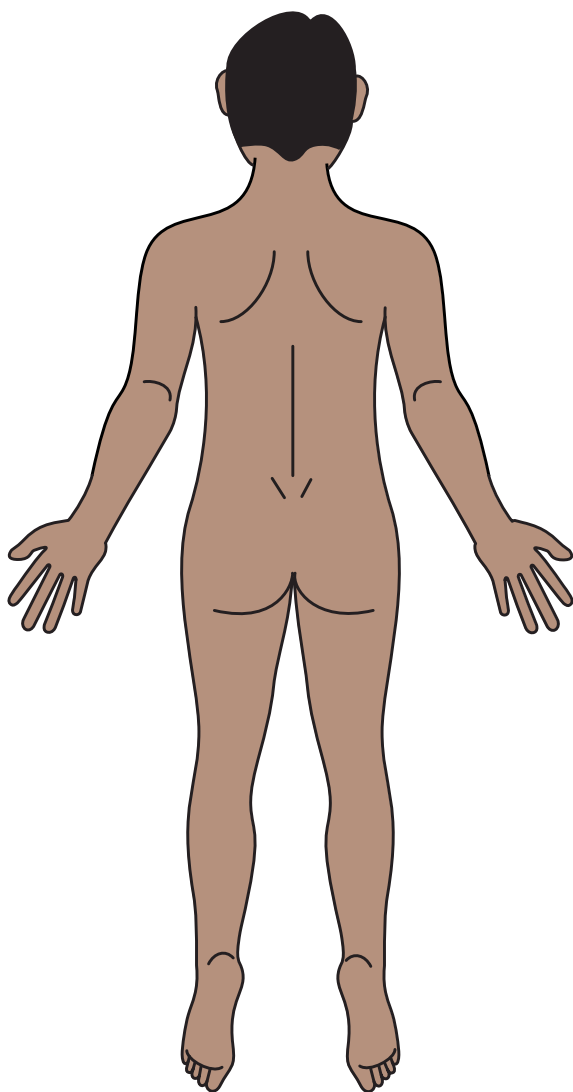
Where it hurts

Use these images to help patients show you where it hurts.

front



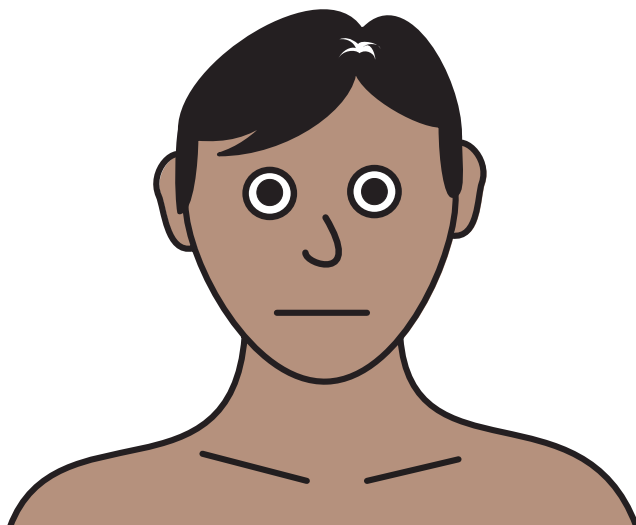
back



Where it hurts

Use these images to help patients show you where it hurts.

front of head



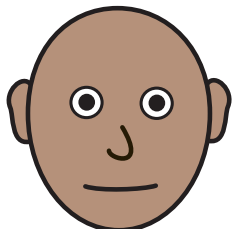
back of head



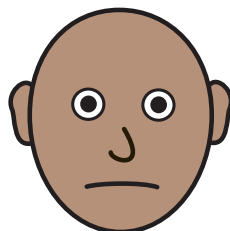
How much does it hurt?

Use these images to help patients show you how much it hurts.

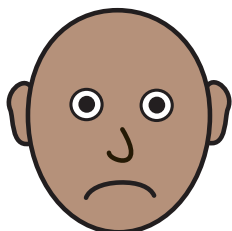
no pain



a little



painful



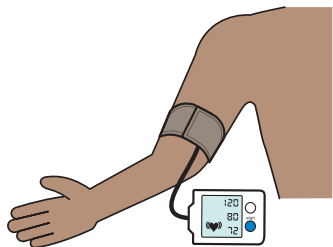
**very
painful**



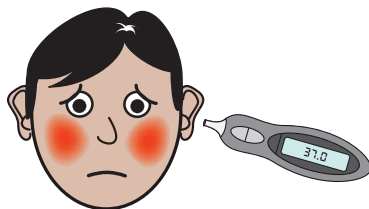
What we need to do next

Use these images to try and tell patients what will happen next.

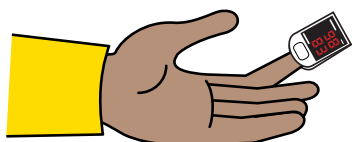
**blood
pressure**



temperature



**oxygen
levels**



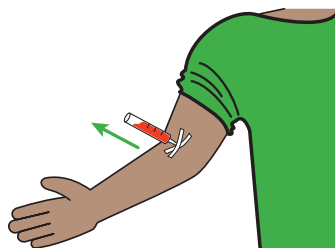
sling



bandages



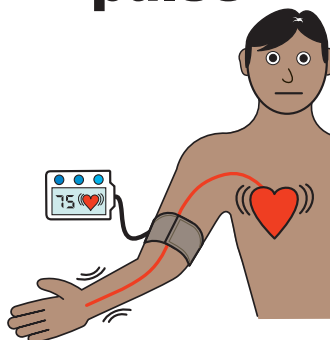
taking blood



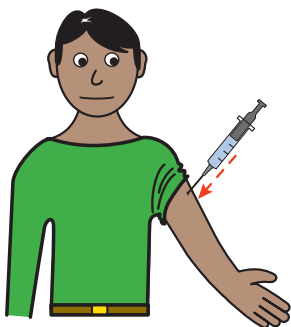
blood sugar test



pulse



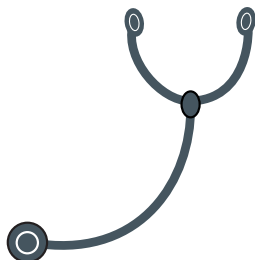
injection



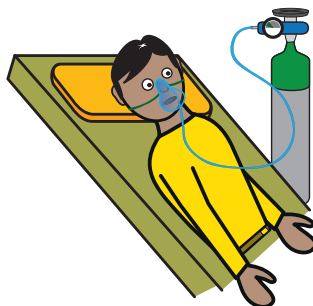
inhaler



stethoscope



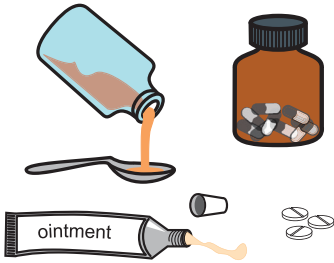
oxygen



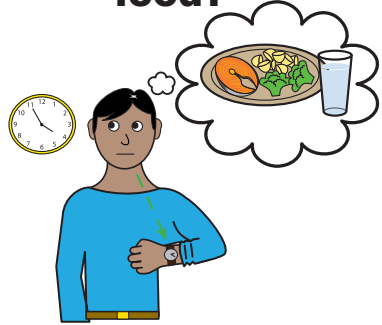
What we need to do next

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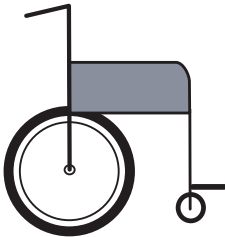
medication



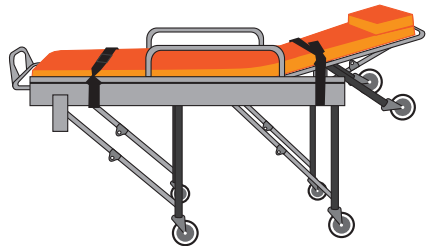
when did I have food?



wheelchair



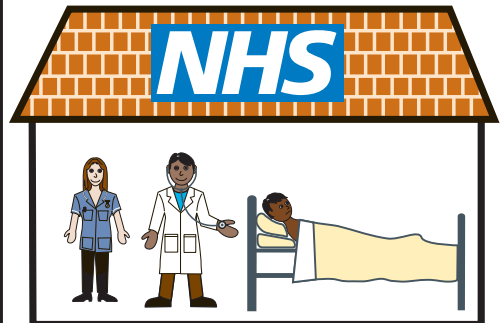
stretcher



ambulance



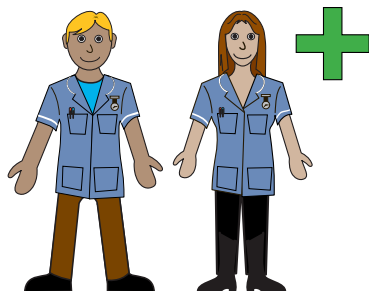
hospital



doctor



nurse



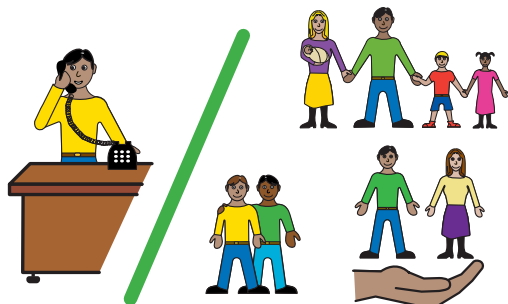
phone



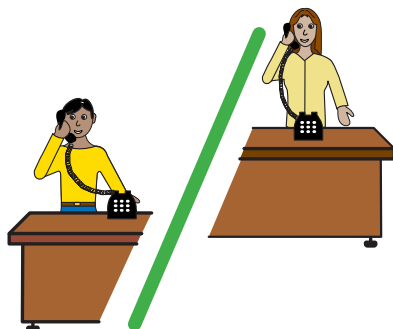
mobile phone



**phone family
friends or carer**



phone someone



The Learning Disability Helpline



Mencap Direct offers free advice and information service run by Mencap for people with a learning disability, their families, carers and professionals. Translation service available.

contact



Phone: **0808 808 1111, choose option 2**

Email: **help@mencap.org.uk**

Textphone: **18001 0808 808 1111**

Text: **07717 989029**

write to



or write to:

Mencap Advice and Information
3rd floor
Delta View
2309-2311 Coventry Road
Birmingham
B26 3PG

information



For more information on this guide including any requests for extra copies, please contact your Mental Health Lead sue.putman@scas.nhs.uk. If you have any ideas for further symbols or ways we could improve this guide, please let us know.

Acknowledgments



We could not have produced this guide without the generous support of our partners in this project. We wish to thank Mencap for writing the guide with us.

Leeds and York Partnership

NHS Foundation Trust

Also, a big thank you to **easy on the **. This is the information service for Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, who have kindly designed and provided the symbols used in this guide.

Where to find out more

Mencap works with people with learning disabilities to change laws, challenge prejudice and support them to live their lives as they choose. Find out more at:

www.mencap.org.uk/

Yorkshire Ambulance Service 
NHS Trust
An Aspirant Foundation Trust

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The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) improves the lives of people who use care services by sharing knowledge about what works.

Find out more about SCIE by visiting:

www.scie.org.uk/topic/people/peoplewithlearningdisabilities

British two-handed finger spelling alphabet

