

Helping Your Child Cope with a Medical Condition

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DENVER — Chronic illness takes a significant toll on children, but the psychological toll can often go overlooked. Children with chronic illness are twice as likely to have more emotional or behavioral challenges in comparison to healthy children.

Learning to live with a chronic condition can be challenging for a child, parents, siblings and friends.

Examples of chronic illnesses often seen in children and teens include asthma, atopic dermatitis, allergies to foods and/or the environment and diabetes.

“Chronic illness can interfere with the normal and happy experiences of childhood, and can deliver a real blow to a child’s self esteem,” said Bruce Bender, PhD, Head of the division of pediatric behavioral health at National Jewish Health. “For parents a child’s chronic illness can be very difficult, frustrating and frightening. There are several ways, however, to reduce the toll chronic illness takes on a family.”

Dr. Bender offers the following tips for parents helping their child cope with chronic illnesses.

- Clarify with the medical team your child’s restrictions and dangers
- Explain those restrictions dangers again to your child
- Empathize with these struggles: “It **IS** tough taking these medications every day!” “I **DON’T BLAME** you for being mad or angry that you can’t eat that pizza. I would be too!”
- Give them outlets to express their feelings appropriately. For example, a special time each day to talk or journal about their feelings.
- Reward your child for daily cooperation with medical management tasks, or for taking age-appropriate responsibility.
- Develop illness action plans for trusted adults to follow, such as grandparents, babysitters and school staff.
- Take a parent’s break. It’s important for parents to maintain their mental health as well.

Parents are likely to be the first to notice if their child is having difficulty coping with a chronic condition. Dr. Bender says parents should seek professional help if they notice any of the following:

- A change in mood and behavior
- School problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Intensified sibling conflict
- A lack of cooperation with medical management
- Increasing social withdrawal

“When children are distressed and unhappy, their illness may be harder to control. The good news is that help is available,” said Dr. Bender. “We have a highly experienced group of behavioral health clinicians who can help to make sure that chronic illness does not prevent them a child from being emotionally healthy and happy”.

National Jewish Health is known worldwide for treatment of patients with respiratory, cardiac, immune and related disorders, and for groundbreaking medical research. Founded in 1899 as a nonprofit hospital, National Jewish Health remains the only facility in the world dedicated exclusively to these disorders. *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked National Jewish the #1 respiratory hospital in the nation for 15 consecutive years.

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treatment of patients with respiratory, cardiac, immune and related disorders. Patients and families come to National Jewish Health from around the world to receive cutting-edge, comprehensive, coordinated care. To learn more, visit the media resources page.

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