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Down syndrome

What is Down syndrome? — Down syndrome is a lifelong condition that a person is born with. It can cause learning problems and medical problems affecting the heart, blood, digestive system, and other organs. The learning and medical problems in people with Down syndrome can range from mild to severe.

People with Down syndrome have a problem with their chromosomes. Chromosomes are tiny parts of cells that carry the plans that make our bodies the way they are. People with Down syndrome have an extra chromosome. This causes their problems and makes them look a little different from people without Down syndrome.

Doctors do not know why some babies are born with Down syndrome. But they do know that a woman has a greater chance of having a baby with Down syndrome as she gets older.

What are the signs of Down syndrome? — When a baby with Down syndrome is born, he or she often has:

- A flat face
- Extra skin at the back of the neck
- Eyes that slant up
- Loose and floppy muscles
- Ears that look unusual
- Only 1 crease across the palm of the hand
- A wide gap between the big toe and the second toe

As children with Down syndrome get older, they can also have:

- A small head or short neck
- A flat top part of the nose
- Small or unusual ears
- Abnormal teeth
- An open mouth with a tongue that sticks out
- Short, wide hands
- A belly button that bulges out

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Is there a test for Down syndrome? — Yes. Pregnant women can choose to test their baby for Down syndrome before the baby is born. Doctors can do different tests at different times during pregnancy to check if a baby has Down syndrome.

A doctor can also do a blood test to check a baby for Down syndrome after it is born if the baby has signs of Down syndrome.

What learning problems can be caused by Down syndrome? — Babies with Down syndrome can take longer to learn how to sit, walk, and talk (called "developmental delay"). Almost all people with Down syndrome have intellectual disability with a low IQ. This used to be called "mental retardation."

Children with Down syndrome might also have problems with their behaviour.

What medical problems can be caused by Down syndrome? — A person with Down syndrome can have different types of medical problems and some features that are different from those of people without Down syndrome. The medical problems can affect a person's:

- Heart
- Blood
- Infection-fighting system
- Digestive system
- Hormones, which are substances that control the way the body works
- Breathing
- Bone joints
- Vision and hearing
- Skin

Not all people with Down syndrome have all of these problems.

Should children with Down syndrome see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. Children with Down syndrome should see a doctor or nurse for regular check-ups. The doctor or nurse will do exams and tests to check for problems that can be caused by Down syndrome ([table 1](#)). Then he or she can treat these problems as early as possible.



How is Down syndrome treated? — Doctors can treat most of the problems that are caused by Down syndrome. For example, a doctor can do surgery to treat a heart problem. Or a child can wear glasses to fix a vision problem.

Can women with Down syndrome get pregnant? — Yes. Women with Down syndrome can get pregnant. If you have a daughter with Down syndrome, talk to her about sex and ways to avoid getting pregnant.

What will life be like for a person with Down syndrome? — Many people with Down syndrome live happy and full lives. But they usually need help with some day-to-day tasks.

Taking care of someone with Down syndrome has its ups and downs. If you have a hard time taking care of someone with Down syndrome, talk with your doctor or nurse. He or she can work with you to get help.

Adopted from Up To Date Patient information.