

Observing General Health

1. When you care for someone, learn to become observant. This means that each day, as you provide care or spend time with the person, take the time to watch him or her closely. Your observations may tell you that the person has a serious health problem.
2. Look at their appearance. When he or she talks, look at their face. There should be equal movement of all their features on both sides of the body (such as a smile, the movement of the jaw).
 - a. Does the person's expression show interest in the people around them?
 - b. Do they have good eye contact?
 - c. Do they listen and look at you when you speak?
3. Look at how the person sits or stands.
 - a. Is their posture and body position straight and normal for them?
 - b. Does he or she hold their head erect?
 - c. Does he or she move their hands and arms with equal strength?
4. Look at the person's posture and balance.
 - a. Notice if the toes of the feet face forward.
 - b. Is the swing of each leg equal to the other with each step.
 - c. The person's arms should also swing equally.
 - d. When the person stands, does he or she have their feet under the shoulders, providing a base for support?
 - e. When a person has poor balance he or she may hold onto furniture while walking.
5. Look at the person's gait, or the way they walk.
 - a. Do they walk more slowly or are they unsteady on their feet.
 - b. Does the person limp, shuffle or drag their feet?
6. Each of the joints in our body has a range of motion, the range through which a joint can move fully. There are ways to observe range of motion:
 - a. While a person bathes
 - b. While a person puts on clothes
 - c. While the person cleans the house
 - d. Look to see if they have trouble bending, extending, or rotating a body part.
7. The best time to look at a person's facial expression and notice any change in mood, thinking or speech is during a normal discussion.
 - a. Does the person state words clearly at an even pace?
 - b. Does the person state ideas clearly?
 - c. Does the person stay active in the discussion?
8. During the same discussion, if you think the person is acting differently, ask these questions:
 - a. "Tell me how you feel in general".
 - b. If the person tells you about a problem ask, "Tell me as much as you can about (your pain, what you are worried about, feeling so tired)".

- c. Have the person tell you about a recent event such as dinner with a friend, walking the dog. Does the story make sense?
 - d. Have the person tell you which medicines he or she is taking and when the next one is due. Does the person remember the medicines correctly?
 - e. Ask the person to describe how they made a recent decision, such as buying an item, planning an activity. Does this story hold true?
9. Always listen to the person you care for. Be patient and allow them to ask questions of you.
 - a. Use good eye contact – to show the person you are listening.
 - b. Stay open and relaxed, always sit or stand at eye level with the person.
10. If the person asks a question or tries to explain something – do not respond by saying “Why”.
 - a. Coach the person to say more, “Go on”, “Tell me more.”
11. If the person tells you he or she has a problem, pay special attention. Listen to their story. Learn as much as you can. Take notes in your diary.
 - a. What is the problem?
 - b. If it is a physical sign or symptom, where is it located?
 - c. Is there anything that worsens it or makes it better?
 - d. What does the person think caused the problem?
12. Looking at a person’s skin can offer a lot of information. The best time to do this is when you give personal care, such as helping with a bath or helping the person put on their clothes.
 - a. Observe the skin each day if possible, changes in the skin can be warning signs of problems. See our lesson on **Skin Care**
13. Everyone has pain at some point in time. But no two people experience pain in the same way. Think about how you have expressed pain. Pain is what the person says it is. See our lesson on **Recognizing and Relieving Pain**. Here are ways a person may express pain:
 - a. Voicing pain
 - i. Moaning
 - ii. Crying
 - iii. Gasping
 - iv. Grunting
 - b. Facial expressions
 - i. Grimacing
 - ii. Clenched teeth
 - iii. Wrinkled forehead
 - iv. Tightly closed or widely opened eyes and mouth
 - c. Body Movements
 - i. Restless
 - ii. Irritable
 - iii. Does not move
 - iv. Excess hand movements
 - v. Pacing
 - d. Social

- i. Avoids talking with others
- ii. Has a reduced attention span
- iii. Avoids contact with others

14. Some persons will not show outward signs of pain. But, their daily habits may change. They become less active or try activities that do not cause them pain.

If you use these guidelines for how to observe the person you care for, you will be better able to recognize change when something is wrong.