

## **PAIN EXPERIENCE AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

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**Background:** Patients with developmental disabilities may have a variety of altered responses to pain, including pain insensitivity, pain indifference, delayed responses to pain, and an ability to feel but not respond to pain. They may also have responses that are not easily understood by others as being secondary to pain.

**Aim:** The prevalence of a significantly altered pain threshold among individuals who are developmentally disabled and its effect on their health.

**Methods:** 31 developmentally disabled individuals were included. At least 2 respondents—family members and rehabilitation staff members—were sought for each person. These respondents were asked to describe a time when the client was ill or injured in a way expected to be painful and to describe his or her behaviour at the time.

**Results:** 52% of individuals were found to have typical pain responsiveness, 11% were found to be hyperresponsive, and 37% were found to be hypo-responsive.

In the latter group, 25% had consistently and significantly elevated pain threshold.

7% were categorized as stoic, and 4% as having slow reaction times.

Persons with moderate-to-severe mental disability were significantly more likely to have a significantly elevated pain threshold.

Medications and communication ability had no effect on pain sensitivity.

The characteristics and effect of pain insensitivity and indifference varied, but the potential consequences included prolonged contact with hazards; delayed reporting of illness; avoidable death, depending on the physician's response to the patient; self-injurious behaviors; impaired response to temperature extremes; paradoxical use of pain behaviors; and non-specific pain responses.

Several respondents mentioned that the search for an emotional cause of hyperactivity often led to the discovery of a painful physical problem.

**Conclusions:** A significant proportion of individuals who are developmentally disabled may be insensitive or indifferent to pain.