

How Will My Child's Health Care Needs Be Met in School?

Do you have a child whose medical condition requires attention during the school day? If your child needs medication while in school, either on a schedule or as needed, or has a condition that could lead to a life-threatening crisis, this article can provide answers to some frequently asked questions. It also contains information about how illness might impact their schooling and how complex medical needs are addressed at school.

Who is responsible for caring for my child during the school day?

Your child is entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), regardless of their mental or physical disability or their medical complexity. During the school day, the school is responsible to ensure that all your child's needs are met so that they are "available" to learn. Medical care needed during the school day may be addressed as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a 504 Plan, or an Individualized Health Plan (IHP), depending on the circumstances (see below). If your child has medical needs during the school day, you should:

- Obtain appropriate medical documentation from your child's doctor
- Share this information with the school nurse
- Communicate your child's needs to their teacher and/or IEP team so that an IHP can be developed

Who is responsible for providing for my child's care and writing an Individualized Health Plan (IHP)?

The school nurse is the bridge between your child's doctor and the school. They will address your child's health care needs during the school day (unless your home care nurse is present). The nurse will:

- Make assessments
- Provide direct care
- Manage your child's case
- Train and educate staff and teachers

The nurse develops the IHP that includes specific details of the care your child needs while at school. An IHP includes step-by-step actions to take in the case of a medical emergency. It is important that your child's doctor have input so that your child's health care emergency is handled appropriately. If your child has an IEP, the IHP should be linked to it; it's also important that the IHP be on file in multiple locations and easily accessible in the event of an emergency or nurse absence. A backup plan should also be included in case the school nurse is unavailable. The school nurse may delegate responsibility to unlicensed individuals, but still has the responsibility to ensure the child's needs are handled appropriately. Ideally, the school nurse should help reduce absenteeism, improve health outcomes, and help maximize a student's potential for success.

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What is an IEP and how is it used to address medical concerns?

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) provides for special instruction of educational materials. The IHP should be incorporated into the IEP. The IEP team determines appropriate goals and supports needed for a child to have a successful school year. To qualify for an IEP, a child must fit into a specific category that requires special instruction. One of these categories is, "Other Health Impaired." This category is frequently used for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It can also be used when children have a serious illness, are intellectually typical and do not fall into any of the other IEP categories, but are not able to keep up with schoolwork due to their illness. The school is responsible for performing an assessment and determining whether a child meets the criteria for specialized instruction.

When is a 504 Plan appropriate?

If special instruction is not needed, but your child has an illness that affects a major body system resulting in poor concentration, fatigue, or other symptoms that may make them "unavailable" to learn, a 504 Plan is appropriate. A 504 Plan provides accommodations or modifications to compensate for the illness. For instance, a child with frequent doctor or therapy appointments can request less homework. If concentration or focus is an issue, extra time for taking tests or completing homework assignments may be appropriate. Other common accommodations include more frequent bathroom breaks, quiet time in a special setting, or allowing frequent absences due to illness to be considered as excused.

What role does my child's doctor have in developing the above documents?

While it is strictly the school's responsibility to develop an IEP, 504 Plan, or IHP, the input from your child's physician is critical. Medical documentation is key to helping the school nurse and other team members understand your child's condition and define their needs while in school. It is most helpful for your doctor to explain your child's diagnosis and the impact it will have on their learning and ability to participate in the school day. This should include the impact on attendance, and any necessary medications and their potential side effects. Some conditions can result in an emergency, requiring step by step directions on how to act, triggers or signs to watch for, and specific recommendations. In some instances, a doctor's office may have staff to provide training to school personnel.

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The school nurse has asked me to sign a release to talk to my doctor, what should I do?

It is generally recommended that you do not sign a release. The one exception would be to allow direct communication with the doctor if you are unavailable in an emergency situation. Otherwise, you can set up a conference call where you are present so that everything said can be clarified in real time. While it is important for the school to have accurate information, legally they cannot talk directly to your doctor without your written consent, per HIPPA law. You can and should be the source for providing medical records to the school so that you know exactly what has been said, and why certain decisions are made.

My child has complex medical needs; can their home care nurse attend school with them?

Schools are generally responsible for any cost incurred during a school day when taking care of your child. Some schools will hire your child's home care nurse or nursing agency, especially if they are unable to find a qualified individual who is comfortable with your child's needs. In other situations, your medical provider agency may be reimbursed directly from Medical Assistance (MA). If a school is reluctant to allow your nurse to be in attendance during the day, it would be helpful to provide appropriate medical documentation using phrases such as "medically necessary for continuity of care" which encourages schools to allow your homecare nurse to be hired by the school to meet your child's needs. Medical expenses incurred during the school day can often be billed to your insurance company (generally with no cost to you) with your permission. This is a process called third-party billing and should be embraced when it won't impact future benefits.

How will my child's needs be met on a field trip, athletics, in after school programs, or during summer programming?

While extra planning may be involved, your child has the right to participate in all activities sponsored by the school. IDEA and FAPE apply to these activities, which are generally considered to be the "nonacademic" part of the education process. Details regarding how your child's needs will be met to allow "equal access" to these programs should be included in the IEP or 504 documents. Modifications must be made to an IHP if, for instance, the school nurse is not on the premises at the time of the activity and an emergency arises requiring medications to be available. IHPs should always be available on premises to staff who must be trained concerning your child's medical condition and there should be a plan of action on how to implement the IHP, should the need arise.