

Secondary Conditions: Children and Adults with Disabilities



What are secondary conditions? A *secondary condition* is “any condition to which a person is more susceptible by virtue of having a primary disabling condition.” (In Simeonsson and McDevitt 1999)

Secondary conditions, a term accepted in the field of disability and public health around 1990, is an expansion of the medical/rehabilitation term, *co-morbidity*. Co-morbidity refers to the existence of additional *disease* after diagnosis of the primary disabling condition. However, *secondary condition* adds three dimensions not fully captured by the term co-morbidity. It includes: 1) non-medical events e.g. isolation; 2) conditions that affect the general population e.g. obesity, but which more greatly affect people with a disabling condition; and 3) problems that arise any time during the lifespan e.g. inaccessible mammography. Children and adults with disabilities can experience secondary conditions any time during their lifespan.

What factors influence secondary conditions? Studies employing the (ICF) *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* suggest that environmental features, health policies, and personal behaviors or attitudes constitute risk and protective factors for secondary conditions. These factors may be targeted through health strategies or interventions that will improve for example:

- Available and accessible medical facilities, private offices, fitness centers, shelters, mobile units, and transportation
- Modified equipment in those facilities
- Web sites with approved accessibility features
- Policies that facilitate post-secondary education, hiring, purchase of the best technology

Behavior and attitudinal factors also influence secondary conditions. Therefore, it is critical to include people with disabilities in public health studies that address lifestyle changes e.g. *Healthy People 2010* notes that 32% of people with disabilities smoke compared to 23% of people without disabilities.

What is the public health goal for secondary conditions? Traditional public health functions (assessment, policy development, and assurance) are applicable to **preventing and reducing secondary conditions** associated with unnecessary activity limitations, health costs, lost wages, reduced participation and quality of life. Achieving this goal will require agencies to a) promote healthy habits and preventive health care targeting people with disabilities; b) change environmental factors that undermine health and well-being; c) routinely include people with disabilities in policy, planning, reporting, and legislation practices in the fields of: medical reimbursement, education, employment, justice, community planning, architecture, engineering, technology, communication, and transportation.