

# Practical recommendations for the transition to adulthood for the adolescent with a genetic diagnosis. Special emphasis on inborn errors of metabolism

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**Abstract.** Taken as a group, genetic disorders affect a significant proportion of the population. Historically thought of as pediatric disorders, inborn errors of metabolism (IEM) are becoming increasingly relevant to the adult clinical provider; given the improvements in screening, diagnosis and management, an increasing number of children with IEM's are able to transition adulthood. Currently available data suggests that adult-medicine clinical providers are ill-prepared to appropriately care for this population. Although practical management and transition guidelines exist for a minority of disorders, there is a significant lack of guidance for the great majority of conditions. Based on our review of the relevant literature, we set out to provide practical recommendations to assist in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, with an emphasis on patients with an inborn error of metabolism.

## 1. The burden of genetic disease in adults

There is an unexpected paradox when discussing the population prevalence of genetic disorders; they are rare but also common. On an individual basis, genetic diagnoses are rare. Some genetic disorders are so rare that only a handful of reported cases worldwide exist, and even the incidence of the most common genetic conditions such as familial hypercholesterolemia [1] (1 in 256) or the hereditary breast and ovarian cancer syndrome (HBOC) [2] (1 in 450) pales in comparison with common multifactorial disorders in adults such as hypertension [3] (as high as 1 in 3) or type 2 diabetes [4] (1 in 12). However, when taken together as a group, Mendelian disorders are thought to affect close to 1 in 10 individuals according to the National Organization for rare Disorders (<https://rarediseases.org/>). Of note, these numbers do not take into account relatively frequent but incompletely penetrant genetic disorders such as hereditary hemochromatosis and factor V Leiden.

The same holds true for inborn errors of metabolism (IEM), although individually rare, when taken together they affect 1 in 1,000 individuals [5]. Inborn errors are a group of Mendelian disorders wherein the genetic lesion is in a gene that primarily affects a unit step of metabolism. The archetypal IEM is

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30 phenylketonuria (PKU), a disorder caused by phenylalanine hydroxylase deficiency that is typically  
31 identified by state-run newborn screening programs and treated for life with a combination of diet  
32 modification (protein restriction and medical formula) and pharmacologic intervention (cofactor sup-  
33 plementation (BH4) and enzyme replacement therapy (pegvaliase)). Historically, IEM's were thought  
34 about as pediatric conditions but they are becoming increasingly relevant in the adult population. Much  
35 of this rising interest comes as a consequence of a better understanding of the human genome and the  
36 increasing role molecular testing and genetics and genomics as a whole play in mainstream medicine.

37 The number of genetic tests offered by clinical laboratories has grown at a steady pace since the  
38 elucidation of the human genome in the early 2000's. There are reportedly, a staggering 75,000 genetic  
39 tests on the market with 10 new tests entering the market daily [6]. The widespread availability of  
40 genetic testing has led to the increased recognition of milder phenotypes and the discovery of the  
41 molecular etiology of many disorders [7–9], heretofore only identified or defined clinically. Case in  
42 point, the American College of Medical Genetics (ACMG) guidelines recommend that pathogenic  
43 and likely pathogenic variants in 59 clinically actionable genes, unrelated to the underlying reason  
44 for testing, be returned by clinical laboratories for clinicians to use, with appropriate consent, in their  
45 patients' care [10]; 1–3% of individuals harbors one of these medically actionable variants [11] and up  
46 to an additional 50% of individuals are carriers for a rare disorder. It is not unusual for an ostensibly  
47 healthy adult to receive a new diagnosis of a genetic disorder after undergoing testing for an unrelated  
48 indication, and when genomic sequencing technology is employed for diagnosis, it is not uncommon  
49 to find more than one genetic disease in a patient [12].

50 Inborn errors of metabolism have traditionally been thought about as exclusive or primarily affecting  
51 the pediatric population, this view is partly based on the fact that severe presentations will almost  
52 invariably manifest in neonates and children. This has created a skewed population of providers  
53 caring for these patients; for example, in looking at the breakdown of primary specialty for board  
54 certified geneticists in the United States, 80% of them (as of 2018) are either pediatricians or obstetri-  
55 cian/gynecologists.

56 Although it has been recognized for some time that some IEM's have mild presentations or slowly  
57 progressive courses, the last several years have seen advances in testing and therapies, early disease  
58 recognition and a broadening understanding of genetics that has allowed for two situations to arise;  
59 1. Increased recognition of genetic disorders presenting in adolescence or adulthood; and 2. Increased  
60 life expectancy for children with, otherwise fatal, early-onset genetic disease. The overarching result  
61 is a novel patient population not adequately addressed by the existing healthcare paradigm. Clinical  
62 providers caring for adults with IEM will not only manage patients with adult onset disorders but  
63 also adults with early-onset disorders that have been successfully managed through childhood and  
64 adolescence.

65 There is literature that suggests that the average healthcare provider may be underprepared to deal  
66 with the expanding genetic needs of the adult population. A 2010 study showed that in about 30% of the  
67 cases, there were problems with tests ordered, the most common being ordering the wrong test [13]. In  
68 a different study looking at self-perception of knowledge base, a full 74% of providers rated themselves  
69 at "somewhat poor" or "very poor" and close to 80% recognized their need for additional training [14].  
70 When looking at the comfort level of pediatricians and internists in providing care for young adults  
71 with genetic disorders, a majority felt unprepared to do so and there was no clear consensus on which  
72 specialty should care for these patients [15]. An additional issue is the lack of guidelines, standards  
73 and systems in place [16] to guarantee the proper transition from adolescence to adulthood with data  
74 to suggest that young people suffer deteriorating health as they drift away from the adult health care  
75 teams [17, 18].

76 These issues highlight why, now more than ever, there needs to be a concerted effort from  
77 provider education and training, health care systems, medical insurance companies, patient-led groups

Table 1  
Examples of inborn errors of metabolism with milder adult-onset forms

Disorder	Gene	Childhood presentation	Adult presentation
Fabry disease	<i>GLA</i>	Crisis of acroparesthesia	Strokes, cardiomyopathy, hearing loss, proteinuria
Wilson disease	<i>ATP7B</i>	Liver failure	Dysarthria, kidney failure, psych symptoms, parkinsonism
Gaucher type 1	<i>GBA</i>	Bone disease, hepatomegaly	Parkinson's disease
OTC deficiency	<i>OTC</i>	Coma, failure to thrive	Protein aversion, abdominal pain, stroke-like episodes
Homocystinuria	<i>CBS</i>	Developmental delay, lens dislocation, scoliosis	Strokes, thrombophilia
CPT II	<i>CPT2</i>	Cardiomyopathy and liver failure	Rhabdomyolysis
GM2 gangliosidosis	<i>HEXA</i>	Progressive neuro deterioration, visual loss, cherry red spot	Motor neuron disease, dystonia, psychosis
Adrenoleukodystrophy	<i>ABCD1</i>	Early-onset dementia, ataxia, quadriplegia	Psych symptoms, chronic spastic paraparesis
Niemann-Pick type C	<i>NPC1</i>	Liver disease, developmental delay, vertical SNGP	Ataxia, psychosis, splenomegaly
MSUD	<i>DBT BCKDHB BCKDHA</i>	Coma, failure to thrive	Encephalopathy, episodes of nausea and vomiting
GAMT deficiency	<i>GAMT</i>	Developmental delay, hypotonia, seizures	Isolated myopathy

\*CPTII, Carnitine Palmitoyltransferase II; GAMT, Guanidinoacetate Methyltransferase; OTC, Ornithine Transcarbamylase; SNGP, Supranuclear Gaze Palsy.

and professional organizations to ensure the transition from adolescent to adult genetics care is successful.

## 2. Addressing the problem

The exact prevalence of IEM in the adult population is currently unknown. As mentioned previously, there are two main groups requiring the involvement of knowledgeable clinical providers in this population. Genetic disorders with adult-onset forms (see Table 1), and conditions that present in childhood or adolescence but either due to their slowly progressive course or effective treatment, become chronic conditions with prolonged life expectancy [19] (see Table 2). Both groups will benefit from a comprehensive and systematic approach to their care.

There is currently no agreed upon answer to the question of who assumes responsibility for the care of adult patients with IEM. Many adult-onset forms of IEM have as a cardinal feature neurological symptoms such as seizures [20], spastic paraparesis [21], peripheral neuropathy [22], movement disorders [23] (chorea, parkinsonism, tics or myoclonus) or psychosis and other atypical psychiatric manifestations [24]. By virtue of their presentation, a large percentage of adult-onset patients are seen and managed by neurologists or psychiatrists; other IEM's however can present with prominent liver failure [25] (Wilson disease, hereditary hemochromatosis, citrin deficiency); cardiac manifestations [26] (cardiomyopathy, cardiomegaly, electrical conduction disorders) or other major organ systems primarily affected, prompting evaluation and management by the respective specialist.

In the case of pediatric patients transitioning to adult care, the question is no closer to being answered conclusively. There is currently no general established guidelines as to who owns primary responsibility

Table 2  
Examples of treatable inborn errors of metabolism with increased life expectancy

Disorder	Treatment	Residual phenotype
Classic PKU	Dietary modifications, Kuvan®	Mild intellectual disability, neuropsychological issues
MSUD	Dietary modifications, OLT	Mild intellectual disability, ADHD, anxiety
MMA/PA	Dietary modifications, carnitine, MTZ, liver transplant, hydroxycobalamin	Mild-moderate intellectual disability, movement disorders, renal impairment
GSD I (von Gierke disease)	Dietary modifications, liver/kidney transplant	Renal impairment, hepatic adenomas, osteoporosis, anemia
Classic galactosemia	Dietary modifications	Growth retardation, cognitive delays, movement disorders, osteoporosis
MCAD deficiency	Dietary modifications	Case reports of pregnancy-related complications (hypoglycemia, acute liver failure)
Tyrosinemia type I	Dietary modifications, Nitisinone, liver transplant	Intellectual disability, liver cancer
Holocarboxylase Synthetase deficiency	Biotin supplementation	Intellectual disability
Mucopolysaccharidosis type II	Enzyme replacement therapy, HSCT	Residual neurological disease

\*HSCT, Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplantation; GSD, Glycogen Storage Disease; MCAD, Medium-Chain Acyl-Coenzyme A Dehydrogenase; MMA, Methylmalonic Acidemia; MSUD, Maple Syrup Urine Disease; MTZ, Metronidazole; OLT, Orthotopic Liver Transplantation; PA, Propionic Acidemia; PKU, Phenylketonuria.

for these patients [15]; in the case of more common genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis, much work has been done to develop bona-fide adult programs, modeled after pediatric programs, and ensuring the collaboration between pediatric and adult counterparts. The results are the establishment of successful transition programs ensuring lifelong appropriate treatment and improved outcomes [27]. Programs such as these or those that have been developed for congenital heart disease [28] or even non-genetic disorders like pediatric HIV infection [29], can be looked to as models or templates for the myriad genetic disorders that are expected to need coordinated efforts to transition patients into adult care. For the majority of genetic disorders however, it varies between centers, with some of these patients still being followed by the pediatrics department to some extent while others have made the transition to internal medicine, family practice or other adult medicine departments.

Studies looking at centers specialized in the care of adults with IEM in Europe show that the most common diagnoses are conditions for which there is treatment in the form of replacement therapy or dietary modifications such as disorders of amino acid metabolism, lysosomal storage disorders, mitochondrial disorders and glycogen storage disorders [30] (see Table 3). The age of diagnosis is quite variable, as expected. Conditions such as PKU are overwhelmingly (84%) diagnosed at the newborn stage while others such as mitochondrial disorders (85%), Fabry disease and homocystinuria are diagnosed in adulthood [31]. In a large cohort of 2,022 patients seen at centers specializing in the care of adults with IEM, a significant proportion of cases (45.7%) were diagnosed in adulthood [31], of particular interest are conditions that could present initially as a metabolic crisis in adulthood such as ornithine transcarbamylase (OTC) deficiency, or the porphyrias in which as many as 50–90% of cases presented in adulthood. These data support the importance of having competent, well-trained adult providers ready to take on this growing population and a good starting point to identify conditions to

Table 3  
Common inborn errors of metabolism observed in a large cohort of patients  
seen in specialized adult centers in Europe

Disorder	Median Age	Percentage of the total
PKU	34	20%
Fabry disease	45	8.8%
CPEO	59.5	4.3%
Gaucher disease	48	4.2%
Homocystinuria	35	3.9%
X-adrenoleukodystrophy	47	3.8%
Pompe disease	55	3.6%
Galactosemia	29	2.7%
MELAS	42	2.6%
Trimethylaminuria	44	2.4%
McArdle disease	51	2.5%
OTC deficiency	33	2.2%
Hypophosphatemic rickets	36	1.4%
Maple syrup urine disease	27	1.1%
GSD III (Cori disease)	38	1%
GSD I (von Gierke disease)	29	1%
Niemann-Pick type C	35	0.9%
MCAD deficiency	23	0.8%

\*CPEO, Chronic Progressive External Ophthalmoplegia; GSD, Glycogen Storage Disease; MCAD, Medium-Chain Acyl-Coenzyme A Dehydrogenase; MELAS, Mitochondrial Encephalopathy, Lactic Acidosis and Stroke-Like Episodes; OTC, Ornithine Transcarbamylase; PKU, Phenylketonuria.

be prioritized in terms of medical management guideline development and educational interventions for physicians and other providers.

### 3. Practical recommendations

It is important to recognize that the transition from adolescence to adult care carries many variables with no one-size-fit-all approach. Although the following are intended to guide the transition process from pediatric to adult care, they can also be used to guide the care of patients initially diagnosed in adulthood.

There are many medical, societal, legal and ethical issues surrounding the care of transitioning and adult IEM patients [32]. For instance, patients located in countries with highly specialized medical centers with dedicated units for adults with IEM's will have access to additional resources compared to patients living in developing countries or living in remote or rural areas. Other important issues such as medical insurance coverage, social support network, financial resources, cultural and religious barriers, age of consent and legal requirements to be an adult need to be considered for each individual.

The following guidelines are based on our personal experience with an expansive, multicenter, integrated health care system and a careful review of the literature. Although there are many guidelines that can assist with guiding the transition to care, the individual needs of the patient need be considered [30, 33–36] and should take into account the many medical, psychosocial, educational and vocational needs of the patients.

137 1. **Coordination of care.** The care of patients with complex genetic disorders or IEM's typically  
138 requires a multidisciplinary team approach. Whenever possible, patients with an IEM should be  
139 initially evaluated at a reference academic center with ample experience and resources. Once  
140 the patient has had a thorough evaluation and a comprehensive medical management plan has  
141 been developed, continuation of care with the local provider should be established. Ideally, an  
142 interested and motivated named provider or provider group exists in the local community able  
143 to care for these patients such as described in the concept of the "medical home" promulgated  
144 by the American Academy of Pediatrics for the care of pediatric patients with complex medical  
145 needs [37].

146 Cooperation and clear communication between the larger academic center and local providers is  
147 paramount; this is particularly true if there are new symptoms or decompensations the local team  
148 does not feel prepared to deal with. Since this model may not be feasible in certain situations  
149 (remote location, financial limitations, difficulty with mobility/traveling), every effort should be  
150 made to seek alternative health delivery models such as home visits or telemedicine to care for  
151 these patients since the likelihood to be lost to follow up is high. Evidence suggests that having  
152 a named transition coordinator to assist in the process of navigating the health care system leads  
153 to improved outcomes [38]. Every effort should be made to designate a transition coordinator for  
154 all adult IEM patients. It is equally important that the local care team be able to provide routine  
155 adult primary care, including preventive services, counseling and age appropriate screenings for  
156 relevant adult-onset disorders such as hypertensive disease, diabetes and colon cancer.

157 2. **Medical records and ensuring continuity of care.** Patients should be encouraged to keep copies  
158 of their medical records. This is especially true when confronted with multiple referrals and  
159 studies over many years, sometimes across different provider groups, hospitals or health systems,  
160 a common occurrence for patients with IEM. These transitions in care between different systems  
161 that may not be interfaced makes the tracking of critical medical information, difficult. This is of  
162 particular importance in patients receiving multiple uncommon medications, enzyme replacement  
163 therapy or following stringent dietary modifications.

164 3. **Active participation in care.** In patients with the mental capacity to do so, the focus should be on  
165 encouraging the patient to be their own best advocate. This step involves the transition from being  
166 a passive observant to an active participant in the medical decision-making process. The patient  
167 should be educated on and learn about their specific diagnosis as much as possible. In addition  
168 to potentially improving outcomes such as increased adherence to treatment [17], this will help  
169 mitigate gaps in treatment, even when encountering providers not familiar with the specific dis-  
170 order. To this end, patients and families should be provided with a layperson-friendly disease  
171 information pamphlet, contact information for patient support groups and information on edu-  
172 cational resources on the Internet. Government-sponsored resources such as the Genetics Home  
173 Reference [39] (<https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/>), patient advocacy groups (<https://rarediseases.org/>) or  
174 well-organized disease specific support groups such as PKU (<https://npkua.org/>) have valuable  
175 educational resources available to patients and their families; these can provide important infor-  
176 mation not just on the scientific aspects of the disease but also on everyday quality of life issues  
177 and allow for networking between patients and families.

178 Over the last decade, the rise of social media has allowed families around the world to connect with  
179 each other and form support groups for very rare disorders. These platforms allow for networking,  
180 crowdfunding [40], fundraising and the sharing of information [41]. Some of the more uncommon  
181 disorders may not have this type of readily available information but with some modification from  
182 the published literature, information can be provided to the family.

183 4. **Provider education** is paramount to any system-wide effort to improve access to care and out-  
184 comes for adolescents transitioning to adult care. Efforts should be made to target graduate medical

185 education (GME) and continuing medical education (CME) initiatives for physicians and other  
186 providers. Efforts should be focused on conditions known to be more common in these patient  
187 populations (Table 3).

- 188 5. **System support.** Individuals and families may need assistance with the psychosocial aspects of  
189 the transition process; this is particularly true in individuals who may have intellectual or physical  
190 disabilities. Every effort should be made to ensure a smooth transition of ancillary services if still  
191 required such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, orthotics, physical therapy or psychiatric  
192 support. Appropriate support has been shown to increase medication adherence, an issue that  
193 affects a significant proportion of adolescent patients transitioning to adult care [33].
- 194 6. **Autonomy and quality of life.** Patients with IEM's transitioning to adulthood still need to  
195 make decisions affecting their everyday lives such as sexual activity and contraception, stress  
196 management, attending higher education, vocational issues, and substance abuse. There are spe-  
197 cific considerations depending on the individual circumstances that need to be addressed. Effort  
198 should be made at the local level to provide education and support on these issues early on as  
199 comprehensively as possible.

200 It is generally assumed that patients over 18 years are legally adults (in most states) and able to  
201 make their own decisions. Although many adult patients with an IEM will retain their ability to  
202 make decisions about their life and healthcare, in individuals that are physically or mentally unable to  
203 care for themselves, courts may appoint a guardian to make decisions for the patient. The purpose of  
204 guardianship is to protect the individual's interests and rights. In some cases, guardians make decisions  
205 regarding medical treatment and end-of-life decisions. The medical team should encourage the family  
206 to seek information regarding guardianship, advance directives, medical proxies and related issues  
207 during the transition to adulthood.

#### 208 **4. Additional concerns surrounding a genetic diagnosis in adolescents transitioning to** 209 **adulthood**

210 There are some additional concerns that merit special mention for individual patients and their  
211 families in this population.

- 212 1. **Transition to life after secondary school.** Adolescents transitioning to adulthood have to make  
213 decisions regarding higher educational and vocational career paths. This is an area where support  
214 groups can have a positive effect; studies have shown that adolescents with chronic conditions  
215 benefit from the opportunity to exchange ideas and information with peers related to vocational  
216 or educational issues [42].
- 217 2. **Economic issues.** Financing long-term care of an adult with a genetic disorder. According to data  
218 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average cost of raising a child in the United States  
219 over 18 years is \$240,000 [43]. Cost analysis performed in families caring for children with spe-  
220 cial needs show that this amount can be significantly higher in this population [44]. This is due not  
221 only to the direct costs associated with the increased utilization of healthcare resources used, but  
222 also other additional factors such as the need for continuous and experienced childcare/caregiving  
223 needs, parental emotional distress, and in some cases, loss of parental productivity [45–48]. Many  
224 IEM's will require continued treatment throughout adulthood, some in the form of dietary inter-  
225 vention (PKU) or readily available and relatively inexpensive medications/therapy (biotinidase  
226 deficiency), while others such as storage disorders requiring enzyme replacement therapy can  
227 cost hundreds of thousand of dollars per year [49].

- 228 3. **Discrimination.** Adult patients may face potential discrimination or retaliation based on their  
229 genetic information. In the United States, patients are to some extent, protected by the law.  
230 Signed by President George W. Bush in 2008, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act  
231 (GINA) makes it illegal for health insurers to use genetic information to make eligibility, coverage,  
232 underwriting or premium-setting decisions. The law goes even further and states that it is illegal  
233 for insurers to request results of genetic testing or provide genetic information. Similarly, GINA  
234 makes it illegal for employers to use genetic information in employment decisions such as hiring,  
235 promotions, pay and job assignments. It is important to note that GINA does not apply to employers  
236 with fewer than 15 employees, the Veterans Health (VA) administration or the military. GINA  
237 does not cover long-term, disability or life insurance. In the United States, additional protections  
238 under the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) act may apply to adults diagnosed with an inborn  
239 error of metabolism.
- 240 4. **Pregnancy.** Historically, pregnancy has been a relative contraindication in patients diagnosed  
241 with an IEM. Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing number of reports of  
242 successful pregnancy outcomes in a variety of diagnoses; this presents a two-fold challenge to  
243 the treating clinician: 1. Given the significant biological stresses of pregnancy, the potential for  
244 metabolic decompensation is increased during this period of time; and 2. The consequences of  
245 the accumulation of toxic metabolites that cross the placental barrier on the growing fetus. A  
246 notable example of the first point is the urea cycle disorders. Studies performed in the 1990's  
247 showed that previously undiagnosed, asymptomatic females were posthumously diagnosed with  
248 OTC deficiency in cases of post-partum coma and death. On the other hand, an example where  
249 the main impact is on the fetus is PKU; poorly controlled phenylalanine levels in the mother are  
250 linked to worse outcomes in the fetus (maternal PKU syndrome).
- 251 5. **Family planning.** Because the great majority of inborn errors of metabolism are autosomal recessive  
252 or X-linked conditions, all affected patients are at risk to have an affected child. The specific  
253 risk will depend on the condition, gender of the fetus (for X-linked disorders), partner's family  
254 history and ethnicity and population carrier estimates. Genetic counseling and when indicated,  
255 testing, is strongly recommended for all adult patients with an IEM. Many alternatives exist for  
256 patients that want to have children including pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, adoption and  
257 use of a surrogate.

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