

Evidence update for least restrictive practice in Aotearoa New Zealand



October 2021

This evidence update is for the mental health and disability workforce. It focuses on the evidence for weighted blankets and recommendations for their use based on international guidelines among adults.

What are weighted blankets?



Weighted blankets are often used as a type of sensory therapy as a form of deep pressure stimulation. Deep pressure stimulation

can have a calming influence and assist with emotional and physical regulation. Weighted blankets are blankets filled with a heavy material, such as glass beads, to add extra weight.



Weighted blankets are often used for people experiencing anxiety, sleep problems, or for autistic people.¹

Weighted blankets are freely available and advertised as soothing, or to support good sleep or wellbeing.



Guidelines for safe use are important, as there have been a few extreme cases where people overseas died due to incorrect blanket use.

1. There has been a shift from person-first to identify-first language in recent years such that people formally diagnosed with ASD or self-diagnosed refer to themselves as being 'autistic', 'autists' or 'Aspies' rather than a 'person with autism'. The deliberate choice of the inclusive term autistic by the Autism Self-Advocacy Network recognises autism as a central part of their identity – of who they are, rather than as something separate to themselves, that can be cured or be put aside.

What does the evidence say about using weighted blankets?

Overall, most research on weighted blankets focuses on anxiety, sleep disturbance/insomnia, or autism. A recent systematic review found only a small number of studies involving low numbers of participants and different methods. While this makes it difficult to make clear conclusions, some studies show benefits, particularly for anxiety. In line with this, case studies and anecdotal evidence often support their use.

More research is needed to determine best clinical practice for their use. However, given how freely available weighted blankets are for the general public and their current use in many services, it is important to understand when they are safe to use. Weighted blankets are currently being used in mental health services as an early support strategy to ground people experiencing overwhelming feelings, to help prevent escalation.

The following checklist covers key guidance from various international organisations in the United Kingdom and Canada for weighted blanket use for adults. It is based on guidelines intended for clinical settings, or for clinicians to determine appropriate community use, rather than independent at-home use. The checklist does not apply to children. A different and more conservative approach may be needed for children.

Checklist for weighted blanket use in adult services

Do	Do not
Undertake a sensory assessment ² to determine if weighted blankets are suitable for the person	Do not cover a person's head and neck
Use a trauma informed approach ³ and recognise that being covered in a weighted blanket may be traumatic or re-traumatising for some people	Do not use overnight – if used during sleep, use for the initial phase of falling asleep and remove when the person falls asleep – the blanket must not hang over the side of the bed
Ensure people have enough information about weighted blankets in order to make an informed choice about their use	Do not use the blanket as a restraint
Seek support from a senior clinician when suggesting weighted blankets	Do not roll a person up in the blanket
Ensure people have a support person with them during use	Do not use the blanket for more than 20 minutes at a time
Follow manufacturers care instructions and regularly check for damage	Do not use the blanket for people with certain health conditions ⁴
Use a blanket that is 10 percent or less of the person's body weight	Do not use a blanket more than 10 percent of a person's body weight
Ensure people can remove the blanket on their own	
Monitor the person for any adverse reactions like difficulty breathing or discomfort	
Ensure whānau are trained to use a weighted blanket correctly if used outside a service setting	
Re-assess the need for weighted blankets regularly	

2. See sensory modulation practice checklist for staff at <https://www.tepou.co.nz/resources/sensory-modulation-practice-checklist-for-staff-smpcs>

3. A trauma informed approach emphasises what has happened in a person's past to shape them. Understanding a person's trauma history is important for weighted blanket use as some people may experience its use as a restraint. See more at <https://www.tepou.co.nz/resources/weaving-together-knowledge-for-wellbeing-trauma-informed-approaches>

4. Includes respiratory and cardiac/circulatory issues, epilepsy, low muscle tone, broken bones, skin issues including allergies or open wounds, inability to lift the blanket independently, pregnancy, or poor temperature regulation.

Guidelines informing the checklist

Azuela, G. F. (2019). The implementation and impact of sensory modulation in Aotearoa New Zealand adult acute mental health services: Two organisational case studies [Doctoral thesis, Auckland University of Technology]
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<https://www.cntw.nhs.uk/content/uploads/2017/01/MD-PGN-07-Weighted-Equip-V01-Jan14.pdf>

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<https://www.rcot.co.uk/files/briefing-safe-use-weighted-blankets-children-and-adults-2019>

Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists. (2019). Position statement: Use of weighted items.
<https://ssot.sk.ca/assets/main/standardsofpractice/practicesupport/Final-Weighted-Items-Position-Statement---January-2020.pdf>

References

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