

Overview

Learning disabilities

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A learning disability affects the way a person learns new things throughout their lifetime. Find out how a learning disability can affect someone and where you can find support.

A learning disability affects the way a person understands information and how they communicate. This means they can have difficulty:

- understanding new or complex information
- learning new skills
- coping independently

Around 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability. It's thought up to 350,000 people have a severe learning disability. This figure is increasing.

Severity of learning disability

A learning disability can be mild, moderate or severe.

Some people with a mild learning disability can talk easily and look after themselves but may need a bit longer than usual to learn new skills. Other people may not be able to communicate at all and have other disabilities as well.

Some adults with a learning disability are able to live independently, while others need help with everyday tasks, such as washing and dressing, for their whole lives. It depends on the person's abilities and the level of care and support they receive.

Children and young people with a learning disability may also have special educational needs (SEN).

Support for learning disabilities and family carers

Some learning disabilities are diagnosed at birth, such as [Down's syndrome](#). Others might not be discovered until the child is old enough to talk or walk.

Once your child is diagnosed with a learning disability, your GP can refer you for any specialist support you may need.

You'll begin to get to know the team of professionals who will be involved in your or your child's care.

The right support from professionals – such as GPs, paediatricians (doctors who specialise in treating children), speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, educational and clinical psychologists and social care – helps people with a learning disability live as full and independent a life as possible.

What causes learning disabilities?

A learning disability happens when a person's brain development is affected, either before they're born, during their birth or in early childhood.

This can be caused by things such as:

- the mother becoming ill in pregnancy
- problems during the birth that stop enough oxygen getting to the brain
- the unborn baby inheriting certain genes from its parents that make having a learning disability more likely – known as inherited learning disability
- illness, such as [meningitis](#), or injury in early childhood

Sometimes there's no known cause for a learning disability.

Some conditions are associated with having a learning disability because people with these conditions are more likely to have one.

For example, everyone with Down's syndrome has some kind of learning disability, and so do many people with [cerebral palsy](#).

People with [autism](#) may also have learning disabilities, and around 30% of people with [epilepsy](#) have a learning disability.

Profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD)

A profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD) is when a person has a severe learning disability and other disabilities that significantly affect their ability to communicate and be independent.

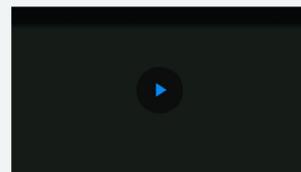
Someone with PMLD may have severe difficulties seeing, hearing, speaking and moving. They may have complex health and social care needs due to these or other conditions.

People with PMLD need a carer or carers to help them with most areas of everyday life, such as eating, washing and going to the toilet.

With support, many people can learn to communicate in different ways, be involved in decisions about themselves, do things they enjoy and achieve more independence.

Read more about [caring for children with complex needs](#).

You can also find out more about all aspects of being a carer, including [practical support, financial matters and looking after your own wellbeing](#) in the Care and Support guide.



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