

Intellectual disability - facts and figures

Intellectual disability affects around one per cent of the population of Australia. People with intellectual disabilities may have significant problems with daily living, but there are many services available to help people achieve and maintain an independent lifestyle. Intellectual disability is not a psychiatric or mental health problem.

Intellectual disability in Victoria

People with an intellectual disability are those who have shown:

- Significantly below average intelligence level (based on an IQ test)

and

- Significant difficulties with the personal skills needed for everyday living (identified before they are 18 years old).

The effects vary in severity

Intellectual disability affects some people more than others. Approximately 143,600 Victorians are affected or about 2.9 per cent of the population. The majority of people with an intellectual disability are mildly affected (approximately 85 per cent).

People with an intellectual disability can be independent

If you have an intellectual disability, it means:

- You still experience and feel things like joy, anger, pride, hurt, jealousy and other emotions.
- You want the opportunity to have a range of life experiences.
- You learn and develop more slowly than average, but you can learn to adapt to new situations and enjoy life independently.

Expressions such as 'mentally retarded' or 'mentally handicapped' are misleading and negative. Using terms like these can lead to community ignorance, which further isolates people with intellectual disabilities.

Many things can cause intellectual disability

There are many causes of intellectual disability. A specific cause can be identified in approximately two-thirds of cases. Known causes include:

- Brain injury or infection before, during or after birth
- Growth or nutrition problems
- Faulty chromosomes and genes
- Babies born long before the expected birth date – also called extreme prematurity
- Health problems during childhood
- Drug misuse during pregnancy, including excessive alcohol intake and smoking
- Environmental deprivation
- Exposure to toxins
- A range of medical disorders.

Some measures may prevent intellectual disability

While most cases of intellectual disability have no known cause, measures that may help prevent some of the known causes include:

- Prenatal screening
- Early detection of 'high risk' pregnancies
- Screening tests for newborn babies
- Early detection of health problems
- Identifying special educational needs of children
- Regular visits to Maternal and Child Health services
- Using child safety equipment to prevent injury – such as bike helmets, car seats and capsules
- Not using alcohol, nicotine or illicit drugs during pregnancy
- Improving nutrition
- Using folic acid supplements to prevent neural tube defects
- Universal immunisation, including rubella vaccination for girls and women
- Avoiding exposure to harmful chemicals
- Prompt treatment of childhood illness
- Providing an enriching and stimulating environment for children
- Genetic counselling.

A wide range of help is available

Many services are available through the Victorian Disability Services Program. These services include:

- Family and individual support
- Help for adults with daily living needs
- Support for people living in the community
- Help with finding suitable places to live
- Legal advice
- Specialist health care
- Specific help for individual cases.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Disability Intake and Response Service Tel. 1800 783 783; TTY 1800 008 149 or your Department of Human Services regional office
- Maternal and Child Health service
- Your local community health centre
- Your local council.

Things to remember

- People with an intellectual disability often learn slowly, but can adapt to new situations and enjoy usual life experiences.
- Terms like 'mental retardation' are inappropriate.
- There are many resources available in the community to help people with intellectual disabilities to lead independent lives.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Disability Services Division

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