

Intellectual disability - facts and figures

Intellectual disability in Victoria

People with an intellectual disability are those who have shown:

- Significantly below average intelligence level (based on an IQ test)
- 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. Around 40,000 Victorians are affected - about one per cent of the population. Approximately three quarters of these people are affected mildly. The rest are moderately, severely or profoundly affected. Intellectual disability is not a psychiatric or mental health problem.

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 human 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, and can cause community ignorance, which further isolates people with intellectual disabilities.

Many things can cause intellectual disability

There are many causes of intellectual disability, but in the majority of cases, the reasons are still unknown. Known causes include:

- Brain injury or infection before, during or after birth
- Growth or nutrition problems
- Abnormalities of chromosomes and genes
- Babies born long before the expected birth date - also called extreme prematurity
- Poor diet and health care
- Drug misuse during pregnancy, including excessive alcohol intake and smoking.

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:

- Good care during pregnancy, labour and soon after birth
- Early detection of 'high risk' pregnancies
- Screening tests for newborn babies
- Rubella vaccination for schoolgirls
- Early detection of sight and hearing problems
- Identifying special educational needs of children
- Regular visits to Maternal and Child Health services.

A wide range of help is available

Many services are available through the 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
- Your department of Human Services regional office
- Maternal and Child Health service
- Your local community health centre
- Your local council.

Things to remember

- Intellectual disability is common.
- 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

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