

Causes of intellectual disability and health care

People with intellectual disability should be involved in all decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Some people can make decisions alone and some people will need support. It is critical that supporters know the person's will and preferences to make sure the right support is provided and the right decision is made.

Families and disability workers may be interested to know what causes an intellectual disability. Knowing the cause can help professionals advise how the person will develop and how to meet the person's needs.

Intellectual disability is not a disease or mental illness. But some causes of intellectual disability can make a person more likely to get particular health conditions.

In many cases doctors cannot identify what causes an intellectual disability. In other cases they can work out the cause. There can be many causes, including:

- genetic conditions
- problems during pregnancy
- problems at birth
- health problems in childhood

Paediatricians may be able to tell you the cause of intellectual disability. In some cases, the paediatrician will refer you to a specialist diagnosis and assessment service.

Genetic conditions

One of the most common causes of intellectual disability is abnormal genes. Sometimes these are inherited from parents. Examples of genetic conditions are syndromes like Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome and Prader-Willi syndrome.

Problems during pregnancy

There can be problems with the way the cells divide as a baby grows. Alcohol or drug consumption during pregnancy can be a cause. If a woman gets an infection like rubella (German measles) during pregnancy, then the baby may have intellectual disability.

Problems at birth

Intellectual disability may occur if a baby does not get enough oxygen during labour or birth, or if a baby is born very premature.

Health problems during childhood

Diseases like whooping cough, measles, or meningitis can cause intellectual disability. Intellectual disability can also be caused by extreme malnutrition, lack of good medical care, or being exposed to poisons like lead or mercury.

Some syndromes and health conditions

Overall, people with intellectual disability are more likely than other people to have problems with hearing, vision, teeth, epilepsy, heart disease and thyroid function.

People with a specific syndrome may be more likely to get a particular disease or condition than other people. Here are some examples:

- People with Down syndrome may be born with heart defects.
- People with Prader-Willi syndrome may have Type 2 diabetes or delayed puberty.
- People with fragile X syndrome may have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- People with Angelmann syndrome may have severe epilepsy.
- Women with Rett Syndrome may break their bones more easily because they can have low bone density.

Some GPs may not be aware of the health conditions that affect people with specific syndromes. And so it is important to get advice from a paediatrician or another doctor who has specialised knowledge about intellectual disability.

For more information

Down syndrome - Better Health Channel, Victoria

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ConditionsAndTreatments/down-syndrome

In Health Care for People with Intellectual Disabilities – Guidelines for general practitioners, there is a list of health conditions that can occur with different syndromes

www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au

You might be interested in this fact sheet

- **Diagnosis and assessment of a disability**

This fact sheet was updated in **2018**.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to look at the information in this fact sheet carefully with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.