

What is a Learning Disability?

A learning disability affects the way a person understands information and how they communicate. Around 1.5 million people in the UK have some form of learning disability. This means they can have difficulty:

- Understanding new or complex information
- Learning new skills
- Coping independently

It is thought that up to 350,000 people have severe learning disabilities and the figure is increasing.

What causes learning disabilities?

A learning disability happens when a person's brain development is affected, either before they are born, during their birth or in early childhood. For instance, Down's syndrome is a genetic condition that typically causes some level of learning disability and characteristic features.

Mild, moderate or severe 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 take a bit longer to learn new skills. Other may not be able to communicate at all and have more than one disability.

People with Down's syndrome also vary in personality and ability. Everyone born with Down's syndrome will have a degree of learning disability, but the level of disability will be different for each individual.

Profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD)

A diagnosis of a profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD) is used when a person has more than one disability, with the most significant being a learning disability.

Many people diagnosed with PMLD will also have a sensory or physical disability, complex health needs or mental health difficulties. People with PMLD need a carer or carers to help them with most areas of everyday life.

Sources of support for people with learning disabilities and their carers

Some learning disabilities are diagnosed at birth, such a Down's syndrome. Others might not be discovered until the person is old enough to talk or walk. Once a person is diagnosed with a learning disability, there is help and support available. For example, support from professionals such GPs, paediatricians, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and educational and clinical psychologists is available to help people live as independently as possible.

The professionals involved with your loved one's care will be able to provide information about services to support you in your caring role.