

Intellectual disability

People have different abilities and develop at different rates. Some people find learning new skills or information difficult. This could be because they have an intellectual disability. A person has an intellectual disability if they have both the following before they are 18 years of age:

- An IQ below 70 (average IQ is 100)
- Significant difficulty with daily living skills including looking after themselves, communicating and taking part in activities with others.

About two to three per cent of the population have an intellectual disability. This is more than 100,000 Victorians. People with an intellectual disability have significant health disadvantage with a life expectancy up to twenty years less than the general population, and many health conditions not identified or inadequately managed.

Intellectual disability can be mild, moderate or severe and factors such as personality, coping strategies and the presence of other disabilities (motor, social or sensory) will influence a person's requirement for support with daily living.

Common characteristics

Every person is unique, regardless of their IQ score. Everyone has their own personality and areas of ability and areas of difficulty. Generally a person with an intellectual disability has difficulty:

- learning and processing information as quickly as people without an intellectual disability,
- grasping abstract concepts such as money and time,
- understanding the subtleties of interpersonal interactions (and so may sometimes behave awkwardly or inappropriately in social situations),
- manipulating the ideas and concepts required for planning and organisation.

Needs depend on individual factors

Arbitrary categories of mild, moderate, severe and profound levels of intellectual disability are defined on the basis of IQ scores. These levels give some guide to the level of support someone might need but the way a person functions in their life also depends on other factors including:

- personality,
- coping skills,
- other disabilities – for example, physical, social or sensory,
- the amount of support offered by family, friends and the community,
- what is demanded of them in different situations.

People with a mild intellectual disability

A mild intellectual disability is defined as an IQ between 50 and 70. Generally speaking, a person with a mild intellectual disability:

- participates in and contributes to their families and their communities,
- has important relationships in his/her life,
- works in either open or supported employment,
- may live and travel independently but will need support and help to handle money and to plan and organise their daily life,
- may marry and raise children with the support of family, friends and the service system,
- may learn to read and write.

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People with a moderate intellectual disability

A moderate intellectual disability is defined as an IQ between 35 and 50. Generally speaking, a person with a moderate intellectual disability:

- has important relationships in his/her life,
- enjoys a range of activities with their families, friends and acquaintances,
- understands daily schedules or future events if provided with pictorial visual prompts such as daily timetables and pictures,
- makes choices about what s/he would like to do, eat, drink etc
- may learn to recognise some words in context, such as common signs including 'Ladies', 'Gents' and 'Exit',
- may develop independence in personal care,
- will need lifelong support in the planning and organisation of their lives and activities.

People with a severe or profound intellectual disability

A severe or profound intellectual disability is defined as an IQ below 35. Generally speaking, a person with a severe or profound intellectual disability:

- recognises familiar people and may have strong relationships with key people in their lives,
- has little or no speech and relies on gestures, facial expression and body language to communicate,
- requires lifelong help with personal care tasks, communication and accessing and participating in community facilities, services and activities.

Remember

- A person with an intellectual disability may need assistance with daily living skills such as self-care, communication and community access and participation.
- Categories of mild, moderate, severe and profound levels of intellectual disability are arbitrarily defined on the basis of IQ score and factors such as personality, presence of other disabilities and social support also play important roles in how the person functions in his/her daily life.
- If you're not sure whether a person is able to understand you, assume they can and then monitor their understanding and adjust your language and communication style accordingly.
- Always demonstrate respect for the person and communicate in ways that acknowledge the age of the person, and the value of their contribution.

Further information

Articles

- ***People with an intellectual disability in the discourse of chronic and complex conditions: an invisible group?*** (2008) Linda Goddard; Patricia M Davidson; John Daly; Sandra Mackey. *Australian Health Review*; Aug 2008; 32, 3.
- ***Reducing Health Disparity in People with Intellectual Disability.*** (2005) Kerr et al. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*. Vol2 No.3/4. Pp 249-255.

Websites:

- Centre for Developmental Disability Health: www.cddh.monash.org
- Department of Human Services, Disability Services www.dhs.vic.gov.au/disability
- Disability Online: www.disability.vic.gov.au
- Office of the Public Advocate www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au
- Learning about Intellectual Disabilities and Health: www.intellectualdisability.info/mental_phys_health/health_guide_adlt.htm
- Go For Your Life: *Information for Health Professionals* www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/hav/articles.nsf/pracpages/Working_with_people_with_an_intellectual_disability_in_healthcare_settings?open
- Better Health Channel: *Health information for consumers* www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Intellectual_disability?open