



A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and interact with other people.

The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their learning disability. For example, someone with a mild learning disability may only need support with things like getting a job. However, someone with a severe or **profound learning disability** may need full-time care and support with every aspect of their life – they may also have physical disabilities.

People with certain specific conditions can have a learning disability too. For example, people with **Down's syndrome** and some people with **autism** have a learning disability.

It's important to remember that with the right support, most people with a learning disability in the UK can lead independent lives.

A learning disability occurs when the brain is still developing - before, during or soon after birth.

Before birth things can happen to the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) that can cause a learning disability. A child can be born with a learning disability if the mother has an accident or illness while she is pregnant, or if the unborn baby develops certain genes. Genes are chemicals in our bodies that contain information about us - like how we look.

A person can be born with a learning disability if he or she does not get enough oxygen during childbirth, or is born too early.

After birth, a learning disability can be caused by early childhood illnesses.

Specific causes include:

- Genetic factors
- Chromosome abnormalities e.g. Fragile X syndrome and Down's Syndrome
- Metabolic disorders e.g. Phenylketonuria and Tay Sachs disease
- Brain malformations e.g. hydrocephalus
- Antenatal and perinatal damage e.g. rubella syndrome, toxemia and birth asphyxia [lack of oxygen to the brain]
- Postnatal damage e.g. accidental or non-accidental injury and infections such as meningitis

Children and adults with PMLD are people:

- who have common concerns
- who have distinctive needs
- who face barriers to being included
- who need help to fight for their equal rights.

People with profound and multiple learning disabilities:

- have more than one disability
- have a profound learning disability
- have difficulty communicating
- need high levels of support with most aspects of daily life
- may have additional sensory or physical disabilities, complex health needs or mental health difficulties
- may have behaviours that challenge us.

People with the syndrome have three copies of chromosome 21 rather than the usual two.

This additional genetic material changes the finely tuned balance of the body and results in characteristic physical and intellectual features.

There are some health problems associated with Down's syndrome, such as heart problems and difficulties with sight and hearing. However, these will not affect everyone with the condition. Increased awareness and better healthcare also mean the health and wellbeing of people with Down's syndrome have improved greatly in recent years.

