

Disability Defined: A Glossary of Common Disabilities

There are a wide variety of disabilities—developmental, physical, mental, and acquired. This resource will help you become more familiar with some of the most commonly encountered disability-related terminology. Our goal is for this to represent the most accessible and helpful definitions available. Please click on the link in the title to access additional information about each disability.

[Alzheimer's Disease](#)

A progressive, incurable condition that destroys brain cells, gradually causing loss of intellectual abilities such as memory and extreme changes in personality and behavior.

[Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis \(ALS\)](#)

More commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS is a progressive neuromuscular disease that causes degeneration of the motor neurons, nerve cells that control the movement of voluntary muscles. Motor neurons extend from the brain to the spinal cord (the upper motor neuron) and from the spinal cord to the muscles throughout the body (the lower motor neurons). The disease causes the motor neurons to degenerate and eventually die. As they die, the corresponding muscles are paralyzed.

[Asperger's Syndrome](#)

A pervasive developmental disorder commonly referred to as a form of "high-functioning" autism. Individuals with Asperger's are considered to have a higher intellectual capacity while suffering from a lower social capacity. Lorna Wing coined the term "Asperger's syndrome" in 1981. She named it after Hans Asperger, an Austrian psychiatrist and pediatrician whose work was not internationally recognized until the 1990s.

[Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#)

A common developmental and behavioral disorder characterized by poor concentration, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. Children and adults with ADHD are easily distracted by sights and sounds in their environment, cannot concentrate for long periods of time, are restless and impulsive, or have a tendency to daydream and be slow to complete tasks.

[Autism](#)

Classified by the World Health Organization and American Psychological Association as a developmental disability that results from a disorder of the human central nervous system. It is diagnosed by impairments to social interaction, communication, interests, imagination, and activities. However, the causes, symptoms, etiology, treatment, and other issues are controversial.

[Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

This refers to a range of neurological disorders that most markedly involve some degree of difficulty with communication and interpersonal relationships as well as obsessions and repetitive behaviors. As the term "spectrum" indicates, there can be a wide range of effects. Those at the lower-functioning end of the spectrum may be profoundly unable to break out of their own world and may be described as having Kanner's Autism. Those at the higher-functioning end, sometimes diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, may be able to lead independent lives but still be awkward in their social interactions.

Bipolar Disorder

Characterized by periods of excitability (mania) alternating with periods of depression. The mood swings between mania and depression can be very abrupt. Bipolar disorder affects men and women equally and usually appears between the ages of 15 and 25. The exact cause is unknown but it occurs more often in relatives of people with bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder results from disturbances in the areas of the brain that regulate mood. During manic periods, a person with bipolar disorder may be overly impulsive and energetic with an exaggerated sense of self. The depressed phase brings overwhelming feelings of anxiety, low self-worth, and suicidal thoughts.

Blindness

The loss or absence of the ability to perceive visual images. Blindness is the condition of a person having less than 1/10 normal vision, 20/200, on the Snellen test.

Cerebral Palsy

A general term for a group of permanent brain injuries that affect an infant in the womb, during birth, or in the months following birth. People with cerebral palsy may have limited motor skills, speech difficulties, learning disabilities, or other related conditions.

Deafness

Defined as partial or complete hearing loss. Levels of hearing impairment vary from a mild but important loss of sensitivity to a total loss of hearing. Older adults suffer most often from hearing loss. Age-related hearing loss affects 30 to 35 percent of the population between the ages of 65 and 75 years and 40 percent of the population over the age of 75. The most common cause of hearing loss in children is otitis media, a disorder that affects predominantly infants and young children. A substantial number of hearing impairments are caused by environmental factors such as noise, drugs, and toxins. Many sensorineural hearing losses result from a genetic predisposition.

Depression

A mental illness in which people experience sadness, lack of interest in everyday activities and events, and feel a sense of worthlessness. Depression can be triggered by a tragic event or no apparent cause. Several molecules found in the brain have been associated with depression, which is why it is often treated using medications that act on the brain.

Developmental Disability

A disability that manifests before a person reaches 22 years of age and that constitutes a substantial disability to the affected individual. Developmental disability is attributable to mental retardation or related conditions, which include cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, or other neurological conditions when such conditions result in the impairment of general intellectual functioning or adaptive behavior similar to that of a person with mental retardation.

Down Syndrome

A developmental disability that causes slowed growth, abnormal facial features, and mental retardation. Down syndrome is caused by an extra copy of all or part of chromosome 21. Many individuals with down syndrome develop Alzheimer's disease in adulthood.

Epilepsy

When nerve cells in the brain fire electrical impulses at a rate of up to four times higher than normal causing an "electrical storm" in the brain known as a seizure. A pattern of repeated seizures is referred to as epilepsy. Known causes include head injuries, brain tumors, lead poisoning, mal-development of the brain, and genetic and infectious illnesses. It is important to note that in the majority of cases no cause can be found. Medications are available to control seizures for the majority of patients.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

An umbrella term used to describe the range of effects that can occur to an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These effects may include physical, mental, behavioral, and/or learning disabilities with possible lifelong implications. The term FASD is not intended for use as a clinical diagnosis.

Hard of Hearing

Used to describe a degree of hearing loss ranging from mild to profound for which a person usually receives some benefit from amplification. Most people who are hard of hearing are oralists (communicate by using their voice) although a small number learn sign language. A person who is considered hard of hearing usually participates in society by using their residual hearing with hearing aids, speech reading, and assistive devices to facilitate communication.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV/AIDS)

A retrovirus that consists of Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) and contains a special viral enzyme called Reverse Transcriptase, which allows the virus to convert its RNA to DNA and then integrate and take over a cell's genetic material. Once the genetic material has been taken over, the new HIV-infected cell begins to produce new HIV retroviruses. HIV replicates in and kills the helper T cells, which are the body's main defense against illness. AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is caused when the infection advances. Advancement occurs when the viral load is below 200/ml and is characterized by the appearance of opportunistic infections, which take advantage of a weakened immune system.

Learning Disability

A disorder in basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that manifests itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or use mathematical calculations. The term includes conditions such as perceptual disability, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

Mental Illness

A term used to refer to all mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

A chronic degenerative disease of the central nervous system in which gradual destruction of myelin occurs in patches throughout the brain or spinal cord (or both), which interferes with the nerve pathways, causing muscular weakness, loss of coordination and speech, and visual disturbances. It occurs chiefly in young adults and is thought to be a defect in the immune system that may be of genetic or viral origin.

Muscular Dystrophy (MD)

A broad term used to describe a genetic disorder of the muscles. MD causes the muscles in the body to become very weak. Over time the muscles break down and are replaced with fatty deposits. The most common form of MD is called Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD).

Spina Bifida

A developmental disability resulting from the incorrect development of the spinal cord that can leave the spinal cord exposed. Spina Bifida affects approximately one in every 2,000 babies born in the United States.

Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

Damage or trauma to the spinal cord that results in a loss or impaired function causing reduced mobility or feeling. Common causes of damage are trauma (e.g. car accident, gunshot, falls, sports injuries, etc.) or disease. The spinal cord does not have to be severed in order for a loss of functioning to occur. In most people with SCI, the spinal cord is intact but the cellular damage results in loss of function.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Refers to the effects on the brain after a head injury. Traumatic brain injuries can lead to a spectrum of problems including concussion, contusion (hemorrhage within the brain), or diffuse injuries that cause more severe neurological deficits.