

# Intellectual/Cognitive Disabilities

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## Definition

Intellectual disabilities (also called cognitive disabilities) are included in the larger category of developmental disorders. Intellectual disabilities were formerly known as “mental retardation”; however, this term is no longer used. People with intellectual disabilities have developed at a below-average rate compared to their peers, and experience difficulty with learning and social adjustment.

## Background Information

There are many different conditions that can result in cognitive disability. However, not all are considered developmental disorders, which begin at birth or during childhood/adolescence. (For example, Alzheimer's dementia causes cognitive disability in older adults, but it is not a true developmental disorder since it starts late in life.) Developmental disorders leading to cognitive disability can be related to genetic diseases (such as Down syndrome), neurologic problems (such as seizures or brain injury), or many other potential causes.

The term intellectual disabilities is a broad category, and patients vary significantly in their skills, abilities, and support needs. People who have mild intellectual disabilities may require only minimal assistance to do their daily activities, work, and socialize. Those with more significant intellectual disabilities may require more support.

**You may also notice the following characteristics:**

- ▶ Short attention span
- ▶ Difficulty with expressive language
- ▶ Memory problems
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions and setting goals
- ▶ Trouble performing activities of daily living independently (for example, a person might need help with bathing or going to the bathroom)

## Accommodating Patients with Intellectual Disabilities

- ▶ **Ask if they need assistance performing tasks.** Some patients may need help completing paperwork, using a telephone, or locating their destination. Some patients may not need help at all. Don't assume one way or the other. Just ask them.
- ▶ **Adjust your instructions based on the individual's needs.** Some patients may need directions written in plain English. Some may do better with pictures, such as a photo of the exact type of medication to take. If a patient cannot read or understand visual instructions, record a voice message of your explanation.
- ▶ **Think outside the box.** If a patient cannot remember to take their pills every morning, consider finding them a pillbox with an alarm.

# Communicating with Patients with Intellectual Disabilities

- ▶ **Be concrete.** Instead of saying, "I'm going to leave the room so you can get ready for your exam," say, "You'll need to take off your clothes and put on this robe before your exam. Is that OK? ... The robe ties in the back, like this ... Do you need help getting your clothes off and putting the robe on?"
- ▶ **Wait longer for a response.** The patient may be thinking about your question or comment, and may need more time to process it.
- ▶ **Don't finish their sentences.** When the patient is speaking, if they seem to be struggling, it may feel like you're being helpful by completing their sentences. But this often comes across as patronizing or rushing them. Give them time to express their thought. Then ask for clarification as needed.

## Clinical Scenario

Allie is a young woman with an intellectual disability. She lives in a group home with a few other adults who have similar disabilities. She works at the hospital delivering interdepartmental mail.

Today, Allie's manager sent her to the hospital's emergency department after Allie slipped on a wet floor and twisted her ankle. The nurse asks her some questions about her ankle, which she answers appropriately. The nurse hands Allie a new patient questionnaire, and says he'll return shortly. When he returns ten minutes later, he sees that Allie hasn't started filling out the form yet.

The nurse realizes that Allie may not have understood that he wanted her to complete the form. He says, "I'd like you to write in the answers here. Will you need any help doing this?"

## Resources

### American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

[www.aaid.org/](http://www.aaid.org/)

### The Arc of Massachusetts

[www.arcmass.org/](http://www.arcmass.org/)

### Massachusetts Executive Office of Health And Human Services

<http://1.usa.gov/YktqnP>

### Resource Sheet No. 9 • Intellectual/Cognitive Disabilities

Inclusive Health Care was developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Boston Children's Hospital. We have decades of experience in workforce training and specialized consultation related to disability inclusion.

