



# FACT SHEET

## Physical Disability

### Definition

A life-long physical disability refers to ‘total or partial loss of a person’s bodily functions (eg walking, gross motor skills, bladder control etc) and total or partial loss of a part of the body (eg a person with an amputation)’(1). The disability is permanent.

### Types of physical disabilities

Some examples of life-long physical disabilities include:

**Cerebral palsy** - the most common childhood disability. An 'umbrella' description for a group of non-progressive (meaning it won't get worse over time) disorders of movement caused by abnormalities or damage to the brain before, during or soon after birth. (Cerebral refers to the affected section of the brain, and palsy refers to disorder of movement).

**Muscular dystrophies** – disorders that involve muscle weakness/ wasting in various parts of the body. These disorders can be generalised (affecting the whole body) or effect particular parts of the body.

**Epilepsy** – a disruption of the brains normal electrochemical activity that results in seizures. There are several different seizure types. Most people with epilepsy do not have intellectual disabilities, but a substantial minority of people with intellectual disabilities have epilepsy.

**Multiple-sclerosis (MS)** – disease affecting the central nervous system that interferes with the transmission of nerve impulses throughout the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves; resulting in impairment of motor, sensory and cognitive functions. (Sclerosis - a Greek word meaning ‘hardened tissue or scars’ and multiple means many).

**Spina bifida** – the incomplete formation of the spine and spinal cord during the first month of a baby’s development in the womb.

**Amputation** – the intentional surgical removal of a limb or body part. It is performed to remove diseased tissue or relieve pain (e.g. because of severe trauma to the body part)

**Post-polio syndrome (polio)** – is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus that invades the nervous system, and can cause irreversible paralysis (usually in the legs).



**Acquired spinal injury** – the major causes of traumatic spinal cord injury are traffic-related accidents (motor vehicles/ motor cycles), falls, diving and sports-related accidents. There are two main types of spinal injury, depending on where the damage to the spinal cord occurs.

- **Paraplegia** – partial or complete paralysis of the lower body, including the legs and, in many cases, some or all the trunk. Paraplegia is a back injury.
- **Quadriplegia** (or more correctly tetraplegia) – is partial or complete paralysis of the upper and lower body, including legs, trunk, arms and hands. Quadriplegia is a neck injury.

## Causes

The physical disability may have been caused by damage or injury to the brain before, during or soon after birth (e.g. cerebral palsy, spina bifida) or acquired later in life through trauma (e.g. acquired spinal injury) or illness (post-polio syndrome).

The person's disability may be apparent, such as the loss of a limb; or hidden, such as epilepsy or post-polio syndrome. The disability may vary and be more or less severe in its impact.

A person may have one disability or a number of disabilities. For example, a large number of people with Cerebral Palsy may also have other associated impairments including, epilepsy, intellectual impairment, learning disabilities and problems seeing, hearing or speaking. This can make the area of communication challenging for many affected by Cerebral Palsy as many people wrongly assume a person with Cerebral Palsy cannot understand them and are therefore mentally impaired. This assumption is incorrect for many (2).

## Prevalence

In 2009 it is estimated that 15% of the Australian population have a physical disability of some kind (3). Of those persons with a physical disability, '87% had a specific limitation or restriction; that is, an impairment restricting their ability to perform communication, mobility or self-care activities, or a restriction associated with schooling or employment'(3).

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### Sources

Disability Services Australia

### References

1. definition from The Physical Disability Council of NSW Inc (PDCN) website 2012
2. Cerebralpalsy.org.au
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures 2009.