



FACT SHEET

Sensory Disabilities

Definition

A sensory disability refers to a disability of the senses (e.g. sight, hearing). There are a range of sensory disabilities which include those outlined below.

Vision impairment

Vision impairment is defined as a limitation of one or more functions of the eye (or visual system).

The most common vision impairments affect:

- ☀ The sharpness or clarity of vision (visual acuity)
- ☀ The normal range of what you can see (visual fields)
- ☀ Colour

Legal blindness in Australia means that someone with vision impairment, even with glasses or contact lenses, can see an object at 6 metres that someone without vision impairment could see from 60 metres. This is called 6/60 vision. Normal vision is 6/6 vision (or 20/20 in imperial measures).

Causes

Causes of vision impairment can include:

- ☀ Genetic conditions
- ☀ Maternal infections experienced during pregnancy (e.g., rubella, cytomegalovirus, venereal diseases, toxoplasmosis)
- ☀ Consequences of disease (e.g., diabetes, glaucoma, trachoma)
- ☀ Complications associated with extreme prematurity
- ☀ Birth complications
- ☀ Trauma, poisoning, and tumours
- ☀ Diabetic retinopathy
- ☀ Ageing and age-related conditions such as macular degeneration, cataracts and optic nerve atrophy

Source:

Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children



Hearing loss

Deafness can be simply defined as the inability to hear.

Hearing impairment may be more specifically described according to its degree:

-  Mild
-  Moderate
-  Severe
-  Profound

Hearing losses are also generally categorised according to whereabouts along the hearing 'pathway' they occur.

One in six people in Australia has a hearing loss. Between nine and 12 children per 10,000 births are born with a moderate or greater hearing loss in both ears. The hearing loss can be present at or soon after birth (known as congenital hearing loss) or develop later (acquired hearing loss). The loss may occur before or after speech has developed (pre-lingual and post-lingual). The hearing loss can be conductive (damage to/ impairment to the outer or middle ear), sensorineural (damage to/ impairment to the inner ear) or a combination of both.

A conductive loss occurs when something interferes with sound travelling between the outer and inner ears (eg, infection). These are usually medically or surgically treatable.

A sensorineural loss results from damage to the cochlea (the organ of hearing) or the auditory nerve. It may cause reduced sound levels, distortion and other problems. Hearing aids or cochlear implants are often recommended.

The term 'Deaf' (often with a capital D) is often used to describe people who identify with the Deaf community, which uses Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

Causes

The most significant single cause of hearing loss in Australia is exposure to loud noise. 37% of hearing loss is due to excessive noise exposure. Hearing loss can also be acquired through illness, accident, exposure to certain drugs and chemicals, or as part of the normal ageing process.

Some of the more common causes of hearing impairment are:

-  Genetic conditions
-  Infection during pregnancy, including cytomegalovirus, rubella, syphilis, herpes and toxoplasmosis
-  Birth complications
-  Craniofacial abnormalities
-  Meningitis
-  Head trauma or perforation of the eardrum
-  Persistent ear infections (otitis media)
-  Some syndromes and degenerative disorders



A person with hearing loss may use a variety of assistive or adaptive technology (i.e. devices, tools, hardware or software). For example amplification devices such as hearing aids, cochlear implant or an FM system (reduces background noise), hearing loop amplifies sound/reduces background noise captioning is the dialogue transcription at the bottom of a television screen. Text Telephones (TTYs), Visual alert signallers Reading & Writing software

Deafblindness

Deafblindness is a combination of vision and hearing loss. Individuals who have a combined vision and hearing loss have specific communication, learning, and mobility challenges due to their dual sensory loss. Deafblindness is a unique and diverse condition due to the wide range of sensory capabilities, possible presence of additional disabilities and the age of onset for the vision and hearing loss.

Sources:

Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children
Disability Services Australia

Sensory Integration Dysfunction

Sensory Integration Dysfunction (SID) (also called sensory processing disorder) is a neurological disorder that causes difficulties with processing information from the five senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste), the sense of movement (vestibular system), and/or sense of position (proprioception). Unlike blindness or deafness, sensory information is sensed normally by a person with Sensory Integration Dysfunction, but the brain perceives and analyses the information in an unusual way that may cause distress or confusion. There is no known cure; however, there are many treatments available.

The person may be born with heightened hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli (e.g. feeling pain from clothing rubbing against skin, inability to tolerate normal lighting, dislike of being touched, discomfort with direct eye contact) or lower sensitivity and higher tolerance for sensory stimuli hyposensitive (e.g. Insensitivity to pain, may giggle when given an injection, not register they have touched something very hot, might appear restless and seek sensory stimulation to varying degrees). A person may have trouble in one sensory modality, a few, or all of them.

Sensory Integration Dysfunction is a disorder on its own, but can also be a characteristic of other neurological conditions; including Autism Spectrum Disorders, dyslexia, developmental dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, multiple sclerosis, and speech delays, among others. Sensory integration dysfunction is not considered to be on the autism spectrum.

Source
Disability Services Australia
www.autism-help.org



Autism Spectrum Disorders

Definition

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are lifelong developmental disabilities characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours and sensory sensitivities.

The word 'spectrum' is used because the range and severity of the difficulties people with an ASD experience can vary widely. ASDs include autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified, which is also known as atypical autism. Sometimes the word "autism" is used to refer to all ASDs.

The three main areas of difficulty are:

1. Impairment in social interaction

May include:

- ☀ Limited use and understanding of non-verbal communication such as eye gaze, facial expression and gesture
- ☀ Difficulties forming and sustaining friendships
- ☀ Lack of seeking to share enjoyment, interests and activities with other people
- ☀ Difficulties with social and emotional responsiveness

2. Impairment in communication

May include:

- ☀ Delayed language development
- ☀ Difficulties initiating and sustaining conversations
- ☀ Stereotyped and repetitive use of language such as repeating phrases from television
- ☀ Limited imaginative or make-believe play

3. Restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours

May include:

- ☀ Unusually intense or focused interests
- ☀ Stereotyped and repetitive body movements such as hand flapping and spinning
- ☀ Repetitive use of objects such as repeatedly flicking a doll's eyes or lining up toys
- ☀ Adherence to non-functional routines such as insisting on travelling the same route home each day

In addition to these main areas of difficulties, individuals with an ASD may also have:

- ☀ Unusual sensory interests such as sniffing objects or staring intently at moving objects
- ☀ Sensory sensitivities including avoidance of everyday sounds and textures such as hair dryers, vacuum cleaners and sand
- ☀ Intellectual impairment or learning difficulties



Types of ASDs

The term ASD is an umbrella description which refers to three different diagnoses. Regardless of the specific diagnosis given, individuals with an ASD will experience difficulties in many different social situations such as school and work.

Autistic disorder (sometimes referred to as classic autism)

The diagnosis of autistic disorder is given to individuals with impairments in social interaction and communication as well as restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours which are generally evident prior to three years of age.

Asperger's disorder (sometimes referred to as Asperger's syndrome)

Individuals with Asperger's disorder have difficulties with social interaction and social communication as well as restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours. Individuals with Asperger's disorder do not have a significant delay in early language acquisition and there is no significant delay in cognitive abilities or self help skills. Asperger's is often detected later than autistic disorder as speech usually develops at the expected age.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) (sometimes referred to as atypical autism)

The diagnosis of PDD-NOS or atypical autism is made when an individual has a marked social impairment but fails to meet full criteria for either autistic disorder or Asperger's disorder. These individuals may also have communication impairments and/or restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours.

Source
Autism Spectrum Australia
<http://www.autismspectrum.org.au/a2i1i1l445l487/welcome.htm>
