

## Definitions Related to Disability ©

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):** First comprehensive civil rights law passed in 1990 and amended in 2008 to address the needs of people with disabilities, prohibiting discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications. Even with amendments to the ADA, disparities persist in how people with disabilities are viewed and treated, including by health care professionals.

**Disability:** A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record or history of such an impairment; *or* is regarded or perceived by others as having such an impairment.

**Disability:** An umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions. Disability is the dynamic interaction between health conditions such as diseases, disorders, or injuries and contextual factors, such as personal and environmental factors, that affect health. The definition incorporates both the medical and social models of disability to address the biological, individual and social perspectives that affect function and participation of an individual in daily and community life.

**Disability:** A physical, mental, sensory, or social impairment that, in the long term, adversely affects one's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

**Disabling condition:** The underlying disorder or condition that causes disability. Examples: stroke, heart disease, spinal cord injury, Alzheimer's disease, blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy. Disabling conditions are not the same as disability and knowing about a disabling condition is not equivalent to understanding life with a disability.

**Disability, cognitive:** A disability characterized by difficulty remembering, learning new things, concentrating, or making decisions that affect one's everyday life. Cognitive impairment ranges from mild to severe; can occur across the life span; can be present at birth or acquired over one's life span, as seen in Alzheimer's dementia. The use of the terms cognitive disability and intellectual disability are determined in part by age at onset.

**Disability, developmental:** A severe, long-term disability that can affect cognitive ability, physical functioning, or both; occurs before age 18 and are likely to be life-long. This term encompasses intellectual disability but also includes physical disabilities. Some developmental disabilities may be solely physical, such as blindness from birth; others involve both physical and intellectual disabilities stemming from genetic or other causes, such as Down syndrome and fetal alcohol syndrome.

**Disability, intellectual:** A group of disorders characterized by a limited mental capacity and difficulty with adaptive behaviors such as managing money, schedules and routines, or social interactions. Intellectual disability originates before the age of 18 and may result from physical causes, such as autism or cerebral palsy, or from nonphysical causes, such as lack of stimulation and adult responsiveness.

**Disability, physical or motor:** A disability that affects motor function and the ability to use the arms or legs to carry out usual activities of daily living (walking, using the arms and hands, caring for self).

**Disability, psychiatric/mental health:** A disability characterized by a wide range of behavioral and/or psychological problems, such as anxiety, mood swings, depression, and/or a compromised assessment of reality. These behaviors persist over time; are not in response to a particular event; and affect one's ability to function in everyday work, family, or school life.

**Disability, sensory:** A disability that affects one or more of the five senses (hearing, vision, touch, taste, or smell); the term sensory disability is used most commonly to refer to loss of vision or hearing (e.g., blindness, visually impairment, deafness, or hearing impairment).

**Handicap:** A physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. A set of stairs would be a handicap for a wheelchair user. This term is no longer used to refer to a person with a physical or mental limitation; it more accurately describes inadequate accommodations that will enable a person to function without limitation.

**Impairment:** Problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss. May be loss of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function.

**Limitations, activity:** Difficulties an individual may have in executing activities of daily living.

**Mental retardation:** Term previously used to describe an intellectual disability. Term is considered offensive and is no longer considered acceptable.

**Person-first language:** Use of humanistic wording that refers to a person before referring to his/her condition or disorder: "the person with a disability" (person-first language) rather than "the disabled person" or "the disabled" (not person-first language) is recommended.

**Reasonable accommodations:** Any modification or adjustment to a job, work or educational setting that will enable a qualified applicant, employee or student with a disability to participate in the application process or perform essential job or educational functions; includes adjustments to assure that a qualified individual with a disability has rights and privileges in employment equal to those of employees without disabilities.

**Secondary conditions:** The occurrence of conditions (medical, social, emotional, family, or community problems) related to having a primary disability; many secondary conditions are preventable or treatable.

**Universal design:** Development/design of products and the environment to be usable by everyone regardless of age, ability, or disability.

## REFERENCES

Amendment of Americans With Disabilities Act Title II and Title III Regulations To Implement ADA Amendments Act of 2008. *Federal Register*. 8-11-2016.

American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry. <https://www.aadmd.org/>

Americans with Disabilities Act. (1990). <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). *Facts About Developmental Disabilities*. Atlanta, GA: Au.

National Council on Disability. (2022). Policy Framework to End Health Disparities of People with Disabilities. <https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD-Framework-to-End-Health-Disparities-of-People-with-Disabilities.pdf>

Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010). PUBLIC LAW 111–148. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ148/pdf/PLAW-111publ148.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2030) Healthy People 2030. <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/browse-objectives/people-disabilities>

U.S. Department of Justice. (2002). *The Department of Justice Reasonable Accommodation Guidelines*. Washington, DC: Au.

U.S. Department of Justice. (2016). <https://www.justice.gov/crt/disability-rights-section>

U.S. Department of Labor. [www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability](http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability) and [www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/ada](http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/ada)

World Health Organization. (2001). *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>

Copyright Suzanne C. Smeltzer, Bette Mariani, & Colleen Meakim, Villanova University College of Nursing, January 28, 2017, Revised 7-20-2017 and 12/5/2023.