

Older people with a learning disability

This factsheet gives some general information about older people with a learning disability.

This information is relevant to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Why are people with a learning disability living longer than before?

Age related health problems

Where do older people with a learning disability live?

What services are available for older people with a learning disability?

How common is dementia in older people with a learning disability?

How does dementia affect people?

Dementia and Down's syndrome

What can be done about dementia?

Why are people with a learning disability living longer than before?

Better health care and social care has meant that people with a learning disability are living longer than before. Half of people with a learning disability now have the same life expectancy as people without a learning disability. Some people with a learning disability are likely to live less longer, particularly those with profound and multiple learning disabilities and some people with Down's syndrome.

Age related health problems

It is important for all older people to look after themselves and keep healthy to try to minimise age related illnesses like stroke, heart disease and diabetes. Older people with a learning disability may need additional support to do this. They should get regular health checks and access screening for breast and cervical cancer, as well as dental and eye check ups. Older people with a learning disability should also be encouraged to take regular physical exercise and have a good healthy diet.

Where do older people with a learning disability live?

Older people with a learning disability are living either with their families, in their own homes or in residential homes.

What services are available for older people with a learning disability?

Older people with a learning disability need the same support and services as any other older person. However this does not always happen as professionals working in services for older people might feel they do not have any specialist knowledge of learning disability, and the

professionals who provide services for people with a learning disability might feel they do not have specialist knowledge of services for older people. It is important that these two professions communicate with each other to give older people with a learning disability the best possible services. At the moment services for older people with a learning disability vary from area to area and there is evidence to show that overall older people receive fewer services than their younger peers. Some older people with a learning disability continue to use the specialist services for people with a learning disability that they have always used and this allows them to remain in familiar surroundings. However others are encouraged to move to generic services for older people but often at an earlier age.

How common is dementia in older people with a learning disability?

Dementia is the general term used to describe a group of diseases that affect the brain. Alzheimer's disease is the most common of these. For older people with a learning disability other than Down's syndrome, the risk of dementia is about four times higher than for a person without a learning disability.

How does dementia affect people?

Dementia seems to affect a person with a learning disability in the same way as someone without a learning disability. It can be easy to miss or misinterpret the early stages of dementia in someone with a learning disability. This is because the early stages can include problems with communication, however a person with a learning disability might already have communication difficulties. Loss of memory is another symptom but if the person with a learning disability is not expected to remember things on a daily basis then this may not show. Also a person with a learning disability might find it hard to explain that they are finding certain tasks more difficult than before and so it may be put down to problems stemming from their learning disability.

Dementia and Down's syndrome

Nearly half of people with Down's syndrome will develop **dementia** in their 30s, 40s and 50s. Following diagnosis, people with Down's syndrome and dementia will need a support package. Staff and family carers will need information and training on how best to support the person.

What can be done about dementia?

Although **dementia** is a progressive disease the person will be able to continue with many activities for some time. It is important that the person's skills and abilities are maintained and supported for as long as possible and that medical help and support from healthcare professionals is sought.

Key terms:

1. **Dementia** - a general term used to describe a group of diseases that affect the brain.

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