

Adapting for Athletes with Disabilities
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Understanding Disability:

Intellectual Disability – difficulty with cognitive (thinking) and behaviour/skills, that starts during childhood. Includes general mental capacity, such as learning, reasoning, and problem solving, as well as social and practical skills that are needed in their everyday lives.

Common Intellectual Disabilities:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – A complex neurodevelopmental disorder that typically appears within the first three years of life. Individuals experiencing Autism Spectrum Disorder can have a variety of symptoms, but most commonly have difficulties with verbal and non-verbal social communication, social interactions, and may display a range of rigid or stereotyped, repetitive behaviors, often with insistence on a specific routine. Commonly have sensory issues.

Down syndrome – A genetic disorder that occurs when an individual has a full or partial extra copy of chromosome 21. This changes how an individual develops and causes certain physical characteristics such as low muscle tone, distinct facial features, small stature, and small mouth and/or enlarged tongue. All individuals with Down syndrome will have some level of intellectual impairment. ***Be aware of Atlanto-axial Instability***

Fragile X Syndrome – A group of characteristics caused by defects in a gene on the X chromosome. Males tend to have more significant symptoms than females. Symptoms include intellectual impairment, delayed or abnormal speech, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), distinct facial and ear features, and hyper-extensible or flexible joints.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder or FASD – A disability that can occur when an individual is exposed to alcohol before birth. The effects of FASD include mild to severe disabilities, and impairments can be a mix of cognitive, such as learning, memory and judgement; behavioural, such as impulsivity and hyperactivity; physical, such as smaller height and body size or poor coordination; or sensory, such as vision or hearing impairments.

Acquired Brain Injury – A disability resulting from damage to the brain that occurs after birth. Causes can include traumatic injury, seizures, tumours, events where the brain has been deprived of oxygen, and infectious diseases. Similar to FASD, acquired brain injury can cause physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes, including intellectual disability.

Physical Disability – A condition that affects a person's mobility and dexterity. Mobility is the ability to move from place to place and dexterity is the ability to skillfully move or manipulate things, especially with the hands.

A person with a physical disability may need to use some sort of equipment for assistance with mobility, such as a wheelchair or walker. They may also need physical adaptations to participate fully in activities, such as sitting down, decreasing the distance they need to move, or using different body parts to achieve a task. Sometimes physical disabilities are stable and do not change much over time (i.e. an individual who is missing a limb); or they may be progressive, causing decreased function over time (i.e. a person who has muscular dystrophy).

Common Physical Disabilities

There are many types and causes of physical disabilities, including:

- **Different levels of paralysis**, including paraplegia (paralysis of the lower limbs), quadriplegia (paralysis of both lower and upper limbs) and hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body)
- **Cerebral palsy** – impairment in muscle tone, movement, motor skills and posture caused by damage to the brain at birth or in the first 3-5 years of life
- **Absent limb(s)** – missing one or more limbs due to a congenital birth defect or amputation
- **Reduced limb function** – poor muscle tone, weakness or coordination in one or more limbs, due to illness, injury, defect or a number of other causes
- **Dystrophy** – a group of conditions with progressive weakening of muscle tone and function
- **Spina Bifida** – a congenital defect affecting the spinal cord, resulting in paralysis or weakness in the lower limbs and trunk, often also associated with hydrocephalus or excess fluid around the brain, and associated learning disabilities

Sensory Disabilities - Our senses allow us to take in information about what is going on around us and where we are in the world. Our brains receive and interpret the information giving us the ability to taste, smell, touch, hear, see, perceive movement, and know our body's position in space.

Common Sensory Disabilities

Visual impairments affect an individual's ability to see, and may range from very mild problems that can be corrected with glasses or contact lenses, to complete blindness.

Hearing impairments affect the ability of an individual to hear, and range from very mild hearing loss to complete hearing loss or deafness. Someone who has a severe hearing loss at birth will also likely have difficulty developing the ability to speak and may be hard to understand.

Sensory processing and integration impairments occur when the brain doesn't process or interpret the information correctly. This can make it difficult for an individual to respond to and make sense of the world, and can impact learning, physical functioning, and behaviour. Examples of sensory processing and sensory integration challenges may include:

- Oversensitivity to stimuli, such as bright light or noises
- Poor coordination or inability to coordinate or know where limbs are in space
- Reduced sensitivity to stimuli, such as an inability to feel cold, heat, or pain
- Strong aversion to certain textures, particularly in food and clothing fabrics or tags

Learning Disabilities - Affect the way a person stores, understands, retrieves and/or communicates information. People with learning disabilities are intelligent and have abilities to learn despite difficulties in processing information. Learning disabilities can affect:

- Oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- Written language (e.g. spelling and written expression)
- Mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving)

Learning disabilities are invisible and lifelong. They are not the same as intellectual disability, autism, deafness, blindness, behavioral disorders or laziness. Living with a learning disability can have an ongoing impact on friendships, school, work, self-esteem and daily life. People with learning disabilities can succeed when solid coping skills and strategies are developed.

Mental Health Disorders – Are becoming more commonly recognized in younger children and youth. These disorders involve a reduced ability for a person to function effectively because of:

- Significant levels of distress
- Changes in thinking, mood or behaviour
- Feelings of isolation, loneliness or sadness
- The feeling of being disconnected from people and activities

Mood Related Disorders

Depression and bipolar disorder are two common mood disorders that change the way people feel and make it hard for them to go about their daily routine. Depression becomes a mental health condition when it affects a person's mood in a persistently negative way that impacts nearly all areas of their life including a loss of interest in things they typically enjoy. With bipolar disorder, people experience episodes of depression and episodes of mania, or unusually high mood.

Anxiety and Trauma Related Disorders

Anxiety and trauma related disorders are the most common mental health conditions. It is normal to feel anxious when we experience stressful situations, but these go away rather quickly. Anxiety related disorders are when anxiety becomes more intense, is ongoing and results in the interference of living a normal life. The anxiety seriously impacts how they think, feel, and act. Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety, phobias, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, social anxiety disorder.

Trauma related disorders occur as a result of experiencing a traumatic event. Each person will react to a traumatic event differently. For one person, a traumatic event may have minimal effects on them and for another person the same event can have significant effects. These can include Acute Stress Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

When an individual is diagnosed with more than one disability, we refer to this as '**multiple disabilities**', or '**dual diagnosis**' in the case of a person experiencing both an intellectual disability and a mental health disorder.

Secondary conditions are health conditions that can co-occur with disability, but are often preventable and/or treatable. There are many secondary health conditions to keep in mind. Some of these include:

- Bowel and bladder problems
- Fatigue and pain related issues
- Injuries
- Obesity and weight related issues
- Pressure sores and ulcers
- Joint issues such as arthritis and osteoporosis
- Chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease
- Lower immune function, increased risk of viral and bacterial illness (flu, pneumonia, etc.)

Remember - A disability is NOT an illness and can't be cured the way many illnesses can be. People experiencing disability:

- Are not 'less than' others. They have the same need to belong and achieve, as everyone else.
- Don't have abnormal emotions and are no more violent by nature, than anyone else is. However, some people who have difficulty communicating their needs may resort to aggressive behaviour to get their needs met.
- Are not objects of pity and do not want to be pitied. If they have a comfortable quality of life, there is no reason to pity them.
- Are not 'heroes' for participating in the same activities that anyone else their age would participate.
- Are not eternal children. A teenager whose skill level is at that of a five year old's level is definitely not a five year old in other respects. Physically, they have the maturity of a teenager and expect to be treated according to their actual age.

General Adaptations for Sport

Intellectual Disability/Learning Disability

- Adapt the way you teach to help with understanding – using a variety of teaching methods, breaking skills down more, more repetition, more time
- Find out which ways an athlete learns best
- Regular routines and clear expectations, set boundaries
- Avoid surprises and last minute changes, explain them if they do happen

Physical Disability

- Physical adaptation may be required and they may not complete skills the same way as other athletes.
- More frequent rest.
- They may need physical support and assistance with other general tasks.

Sensory Disability

- Different cues – visual such as hand signals and signs, or specific verbal cues for someone who doesn't see well
- Sensory friendly – decrease noise, fewer distractions, dim lights, adjust clothing requirements
- Allow time to process information

Mental Health Disorder

- Be flexible and patient
- Acknowledge their struggle – it is real for them, even if it may seem unreasonable to you
- Ease anxiety, have a safe "get ready" space