

Physical disabilities

Physical disabilities may be acquired or be congenital. The causes are wide and include conditions affecting bones (e.g. brittle bones), muscles (e.g. muscular dystrophy), joints (e.g. arthritis), nerves and tendons (e.g. polio, multiple sclerosis), spinal cord (e.g. spinal cord injuries, spina bifida), the brain (e.g. stroke, tumour, accidents, cerebral palsy) or may affect overall development and growth. People may have difficulty walking and may use wheelchairs, walking sticks or frames, or braces, or they may have dexterity problems due to the loss of a hand or limb. It is not the cause but the effect which is important. People with physical disabilities may sometimes be fatigued, they may be susceptible to temperature changes or they may sometimes experience pain. Pain can usually be controlled by medication. Most conditions are stable but some such as muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis are degenerative or may be variable over time, with good and bad periods. People with physical disabilities usually need little help beyond ensuring that the physical environment is accessible, and that adaptive equipment, suitable desks or chairs, and facilities such as accessible toilets and telephones are available. Specially designed work stations, raised desks, speaker phones and other adaptive devices can also be of assistance. Some people may need some assistance with note-taking, physical activities and writing tasks. Others may use a paid assistant to take notes or assist with personal needs such as toileting or eating. Those experiencing fatigue will sometimes need time for rest periods. Most people with physical disabilities wanting to enter the workforce will have worked out for themselves how to adapt their environment or developed alternative ways to complete tasks.

Etiquette for Communicating with people with physical disabilities

- If possible, be seated so the person doesn't have to look up. Communicate at eye level with the person. Speak directly to the individual, not to a person who is assisting him or her.
- DON'T SHOUT. Deafness and physical disabilities are not related impairments.
- Never patronise people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Ensure that they have a clear pathway to their intended destination and at meetings or restaurants, make a chair-free space at the table for the wheelchair user.
- Push the wheelchair only when asked. Don't presume a person in a wheelchair needs your help to push him or her.
- When assisting in going up or down a curb, ask if he or she prefers going forward or backward.
- Keep the chair tilted back when assisting on steps.
- Be prepared - learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.
- Never hang or lean on a person's wheelchair - the chair is part of one's personal body space and hanging on it can be very annoying.
- NEVER presume that a non verbal person does not understand what you are saying.