

Supporting people with an intellectual disability who use alcohol and other drugs

What is intellectual disability?

People with an intellectual disability often experience effects on their ability to think, concentrate, formulate ideas, problem solve, reason, and remember.

Most people with an intellectual disability are classified as having a ‘mild intellectual disability’.

This means that many, with support, can and do learn the skills necessary to live in the community relatively independently. You may not always know that someone has an intellectual disability.^{1,3}

Understanding the relationship between intellectual disability and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) can help workers adjust their approach, so they can help people with an intellectual disability access the support they need.

You can find out more through the Network of Alcohol and Drug Agencies’ (NADA’s) [Complex Needs Capable](#) resource.

Human rights and supported decision making

People with an intellectual disability have a right to be [involved](#) in all decisions that affect them.^{4,5}

Like all of us, important decisions can be hard to make, and sometimes extra support can help.

People with an intellectual disability may need help accessing, analysing, and communicating their decisions.

But, having an intellectual disability doesn’t automatically mean they can’t make their own decisions, even important ones.⁴⁻⁶

If someone with an intellectual disability has difficulty making a decision in one area, it doesn’t mean they will have difficulties with every decision.⁵

Some people can make decisions alone and some people need support to figure out the best thing for them.⁴

Communication

It's important to know that the language and ideas you use as a worker might be challenging for someone with an intellectual disability.

You may need to communicate in plain language, use shorter sentences, and check for understanding.^{1,4}

This doesn't mean talking down to them or making the language so simple it loses its meaning.

Using visual, audio, and/or physical aids can be vital tools for communication.

A disability case manager, advocate, loved one, and the person with an intellectual disability can help you understand how they usually communicate.^{5,6}

This can help you collaborate on a treatment and support plan. The person you're working with might also need support to build positive self-esteem, relationships, and social activities.¹

Check out the [Australian Federation of Disability Organisations](#) and [Scope Australia's](#) Tool Kits for more communication tips.

Alcohol and other drugs

People with an intellectual disability can have difficulties with alcohol and other drugs.⁴

They're also at an increased risk of AOD dependence (addiction) because of difficulties with a range of adaptive behaviours such as social, conceptual, and practical skills.¹

For example, this could show up as having trouble with literacy, understanding complex instructions or the law, being susceptible to peer pressure, or having limited positive social experiences.¹

It can also be harder for people with an intellectual disability to get help for their alcohol and other drug use.

Like many people, they might say they don't have a problem or they may not know they have one. This can make finding the right kind of help difficult.⁴

Because physical and intellectual disabilities are diverse and not always obvious, it's important to check with the person about what they need so they can get the right information, support, and care.

Barriers to accessing support services, including alcohol and other drug services, means people with cognitive impairment may experience higher contact with the criminal justice system.¹

Currently, people with an intellectual disability are overrepresented in all stages of the criminal justice system.^{1,7}

But help is always available for people with an intellectual disability who experience drug or alcohol dependence.

Common drug types

The most common drugs that people with an intellectual disability have challenges with are [alcohol](#), [cannabis](#), and [amphetamines](#).⁸

Although research is limited, the prevalence of alcohol and other drug use is shown to be low in people with an intellectual disability. However, the risk of dependence is relatively higher.⁹

Communicating with someone who needs help

The first step is being able to communicate about alcohol and drug use.

Many people are worried or scared to share their alcohol or drug experiences. Sometimes, people with an intellectual disability can have trouble understanding their problem and how to get help.¹

If you're trying to [have a conversation](#) with someone who seems like they need help, try these tips and communicate in a way that's right for the person. Often this involves relevant audio, visual, easy read, plain language, and physical resources.¹

- Choose the right time to talk. A good time is when people are calm and not affected by substances. Activities like taking a walk can also help because you are not looking directly at the person.
- Really listen to what they are saying. Ask questions in a curious, kind and non-judgmental way.
- Use 'I' statements to show that you are concerned, e.g. "I've noticed a few changes in you lately, you haven't been going to school/uni/work as much, what's going on for you?".
- Let the person know you care about them, and you can help them find support if that's what they want.
- Get informed on the substances they're using so you can support them with harm reduction tips. Find out more about specific drugs on the Alcohol and Drug Foundation's [Drug Facts](#) page.

Not everyone who experiences substance use dependence wants to stop or access help. You can find out more in this [article](#) on the Alcohol and Drug Foundation website.

What kind of help is there?

Some treatments for alcohol and other drug use include:

- individual or group counselling
- support groups like [SMART recovery](#)
- staying in a drug free setting for rehabilitation ('rehab')
- being supervised to 'detox' in a supported setting or at home
- Opioid Treatment Programs (OTP) like methadone and buprenorphine.

People will usually use a blend of these treatments. This can take a few attempts, but understanding what is and isn't working for the person with an intellectual disability can help you support them as a worker.

Check out [Treatment for Alcohol and Drug Use](#) for more information about treatment and support options.

Anti-discrimination law says that these services must make a reasonable effort to meet the needs of people with disability. You can expect them to do this - if they say no, try talking to the manager. If that doesn't work, you can go to the complaints body.¹⁰

More information

[Easy Read Resource – People with Intellectual Disability and Alcohol and Other Drugs](#)

This Easy Read PDF is aimed at people who have low English literacy due to disability or other reasons. It uses simple language and pictures to explain types of drugs, what it means to have a problem, how to cut down, harm reduction advice and how to get help.

National Drug and Alcohol Hotline [1800 250 015](#)

24 hour, 7 days a week confidential telephone counselling, support, referrals and information for those affected by alcohol or other drugs.

Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (NADA) - [Complex Needs Capable](#)

This resource was developed to build capacity within the AOD non-government sector in working with people with needs such as acquired brain injury, intellectual disability, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders and contact with the criminal justice system.

NADA – [Access and Equity](#)

This resource helps build understanding of equity and access issues and offers insight about how support can be better provided to people navigating the treatment system.

[Health Care Complaints](#)

This website provides you with key contacts in your state or territory to support a person with an intellectual disability raise a complaint about a health service.

[Inclusion Australia](#)

The national peak body for people with an intellectual disability.

[Disability Advocacy Network Australia \(DANA\)](#)

This website can help you find an advocacy organisation to support the person with an intellectual disability that you work with.

References

1. Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (NADA). Complex Needs Capable: A practice resource for drug and alcohol services: NADA; 2013 [cited 2023 28 March]. Available from: https://nada.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/complex_needs_capable_web_120813.pdf.
2. Gray A, Forell S, Clarke S. Cognitive Impairment, Legal Needs and Access to Justice – Law and Justice Foundation of NSW Justice Issues Paper 102009 [cited 2023 29 March]. Available from: [http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/articleIDs/2EDD47C8AEB2BB36CA25756F0018AFE0/\\$file/JI10_Cognitive_impairment.pdf](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/articleIDs/2EDD47C8AEB2BB36CA25756F0018AFE0/$file/JI10_Cognitive_impairment.pdf).
3. Intellectual Disability Rights Service. Step by Step Guide to Making a Section 32 Application for a Person with Intellectual Disability: IDRS; 2011 [cited 2023 29 March]. Available from: http://www.idrs.org.au/s32/_guide/p040_2_2_DiagnosisTerms.php#.ZCPNs3ZByUk.
4. Council of Intellectual Disability. Factsheet: Alcohol and Other Drugs 2018 [cited 2023 28 March]. Available from: <https://cid.org.au/our-health-fact-sheets/>.
5. People with Disability Australia (PWDA). Disability and Human Rights 2022 [cited 2023 28 March]. Available from: <https://pwd.org.au/about-us/about-disability/disability-and-human-rights/>.
6. Duffield L, Koritsas S, Watson J, Hagiliassis N. Decision-making support for people with cognitive disability: A guide for disability workers,; Scope Australia; 2016 [cited 2023 28 March]. Available from: https://www.scopeaust.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Scope-Decision-making-SupportWorkers_web.pdf.
7. Royal Commission into Violence Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. People with disability over represented at all stages of the criminal justice system 2020 [cited 2023 29 March]. Available from: <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/news-and-media/media-releases/people-disability-over-represented-all-stages-criminal-justice-system>.
8. McGillivray JA, Gaskin CJ, Newton DC, Richardson BA. Substance Use, Offending, and Participation in Alcohol and Drug Treatment Programmes: A Comparison of Prisoners with and without Intellectual Disabilities. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities [Internet]. 2016 [cited 2023 29 March]; 29(3):[289-94 pp.]. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jar.12175>.
9. Bhatt NV, Gentile JP. Co-occurring intellectual disability and substance use disorders. AIMS Public Health [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2023 29 March]; 8(3):[479-84 pp.]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3934%2Fpublichealth.2021037>.
10. Department of Health and Aged Care. National Framework for Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Treatment 2019–29: Australian Government; 2019 [cited 2023 13 Feb]. Available from: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-framework-for-alcohol-tobacco-and-other-drug-treatment-2019-29>.



[Read more evidence articles on this topic in the ADF Library](#)

Published: August 2024



**Alcohol
and Drug
Foundation**

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation is Australia's leading source of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) information.

Find up-to-date information, articles and resources and access the Drug Information Directory.

Visit adf.org.au