



## What do we know about how many people with learning disabilities have constipation?



Constipation is when you do not do enough poos or your poo is hard and difficult to get out. Constipation can make people very ill.



A lot of people with learning disabilities have constipation. They might not be able to tell people what is wrong.



People with learning disabilities and carers need to know that constipation can be a problem. Services need to know how to help people with learning disabilities who have constipation.

## Prevalence of constipation in people with learning disabilities

Symptoms of constipation include infrequent bowel movements, difficulty passing a stool, hard stools or a feeling of incomplete evacuation<sup>1</sup>. Constipation can lead to serious illness and death<sup>2</sup>. People with learning disabilities are more likely to suffer from constipation than people without learning disabilities. They may find it difficult to communicate their symptoms to carers so constipation can get missed<sup>3</sup>. This briefing outlines research evidence on the number of people with learning disabilities who have constipation. This is based on a systematic review of 31 studies published from 1990-2016<sup>4</sup>.

- there was wide variation in the numbers reported to have constipation. This was due to differences in study samples, the definition of constipation used and the method of identifying constipation
- prevalence was generally high, with rates of 50% or more being reported in 14 of the 31 studies, and 21 studies reporting rates of over 33%
- in the most representative sample, 25.7% of people with learning disabilities received a repeat prescription for laxatives in one year compared to 0.1% of people without learning disabilities<sup>5</sup>
- in one year, 18.8% of people with Down syndrome were prescribed laxatives compared to 3.4% of people without learning disabilities<sup>6</sup>
- constipation was registered as a health problem for 59.8% of people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities and 65.0% had been prescribed laxatives in the previous year<sup>7</sup>
- non-ambulatory was associated with constipation
- age was not consistently associated with constipation

Constipation is a significant issue for people with learning disabilities across the life course. Awareness of constipation should be raised among people with learning disabilities and carers. Doctors should actively consider the diagnosis of constipation in people with learning disabilities<sup>3</sup>. It is important that services are equipped with the information and skills needed to manage constipation in this population. A recent report provides information on reasonable adjustments that can be made to improve constipation management for people with learning disabilities<sup>8</sup>. The ideas, information and examples of good practice in relation to reasonable adjustments provided within this report should help services improve provision for this common condition and potentially reduce ill health and deaths associated with constipation in people with learning disabilities.

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