

What Is Down Syndrome?

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Down syndrome is a congenital disorder stemming from a chromosomal abnormality appearing in about one of every 800 births. This syndrome occurs when one chromosome has an extra "part," and an error occurs in cell division, or an extra chromosome exists, resulting in 47 chromosomes. Most people are born with 23 pairs of chromosomes, for a total of 46. When the body produces an extra chromosome or genetic material, it alters the way the body develops.



What Health Problems May Occur?

Babies with Down syndrome are likely to develop more slowly than other babies. They may learn to walk and talk much later than typically developing babies. Some have stomach problems that affect digestion and elimination. Infections may affect lungs and breathing, and other infections in the ears or eyes may last longer. Some may even develop leukemia. Each person with Down syndrome is different, and may have just a few or many of these problems.

Most people with Down syndrome have very recognizable characteristics and physical features. They may have a flatter face, eyes that slant upward, a mouth that turns downward, and sometimes a larger tongue. Physical features, in addition to the eyes and face, may reveal small or misshapen ears, large spaces between the big toe and second toe, and a deep crease across the palms of the hands. Few or all of these features may exist.

What other Developmental Problems May Occur?

People with Down syndrome have different degrees of cognitive disabilities which affect their development. Other problems may exist too, such as heart defects (almost half of infants born with Down's have a heart defect) and mental retardation, causing the person to have trouble learning. Many children with Down syndrome are able to attend public schools in regular classes. Special classes help those with more severe learning or physical needs. The personality of a child with Down syndrome is usually very playful and not tuned in to academics; therefore, parents and teachers should work closely together to create a learning environment that gives the child the opportunity to participate in sports activities, dance classes, music lessons, and even extended playtimes.

Is There a Cure for Down Syndrome?

There is no cure for Down syndrome. It is a disorder that a person will have all of his or her life. Down syndrome is not contagious, and it affects all races and nationalities. No one can "get" Down syndrome later in life. Doctors cannot pinpoint why this extra or altered chromosome problem happens, but they know that it is not the result of what the mom or dad does before the child is born. Any parent can produce a baby with Down syndrome, but doctors do know that the older the mother, the greater the risk.

Do Those with Down Syndrome Live the Normal Life Expectancy?

In the past, children with Down syndrome usually did not live to adulthood. Doctors could not treat infections or heart problems as easily as they can today. Presently, medicines and surgery can correct heart, stomach, and intestinal problems, giving children with Down syndrome the gift of life to age 50 or beyond. Research continues for ways to prevent Down syndrome or at least improve the quality of life for those who have it.

Does a Child with Down Syndrome Get Along Well with other Children?

Children with Down syndrome are known for their happy attitudes, loving spirits, and playfulness. Just because the child with Down syndrome may look different doesn't mean he/she has no feelings. These kids may be the target of teasing and bullying, and like any person, it hurts his/her feelings. If you know someone with Down syndrome, you can be a big help by offering friendly words of encouragement and praise.

Where Can I Find Help, Assistance, or More Information on Down Syndrome?

Organizations for parents and educators work tirelessly to bring awareness of Down syndrome to everyone. It is through these organizations that you may see a person with Down syndrome working in a restaurant, grocery store, or an office. This population of people has a reputation for working hard and demonstrating enthusiasm. They are reliable and have a strong sense of dedication and work ethic.

Great strides in discovering the cause and treatment of Down syndrome occur every day. There are hundreds of organizations all over the United States providing information and support to parents, educators, and others who need help with a person with Down syndrome. If you need more information about Down syndrome, please contact the organizations that are in the list below. Through these contacts, you will be able to find support groups in your area.

Resources

National Down Syndrome Society — <http://www.ndss.org/>

Down Syndrome; Understanding the Gift of Life — <http://www.nas.com/downsyn/>

Down's Syndrome Association — <http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/>

National Down Syndrome Congress — <http://www.ndsccenter.org/>

Kid's Health; Down Syndrome — http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/birth_defect/down_syndrome.html