

National Down Syndrome Society
Changing Lives: Down Syndrome & the Health Care Professional

Myths & Truths About Down Syndrome

Myth: Down syndrome is a rare genetic disorder.

Down syndrome is the most commonly occurring genetic condition. One in every 800 to 1,000 live births is a child with Down syndrome. There are around 350,000 people in the U.S. with Down syndrome, with 5,000 to 6,000 births per year.

Truth:

Myth: Most children with Down syndrome are born to older parents.

Eighty percent of children born with Down syndrome are born to women younger than the age of 35 due to the higher fertility rates. However, research has shown a link between the incidence of Down syndrome and maternal age.

Truth:

Myth: People with Down syndrome have severe cognitive delays.

Truth: Most people with Down syndrome have cognitive delays that are mild to moderate. IQ is not an adequate measure of the functional status of people with Down syndrome. People with Down syndrome have great potential if given opportunities.

Myth: All people with Down syndrome will develop Alzheimer's disease.

Approximately 25 percent of adults with Down syndrome over age 35 show clinical signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's-type dementia; the percentage increases with age. The incidence of Alzheimer's disease in the Down syndrome population is three to five times greater than in the general population, which is 5-10 percent in people over age 65.

Truth:

Myth: The life expectancy of people with Down syndrome is 30 years.

Thanks to advances in medical and clinical treatment and opportunities to thrive, as many as 80 percent of adults with Down syndrome reach age 55, and many live longer.

Truth:

Myth: Parents with a pre-natal diagnosis of Down syndrome always opt to terminate.

Truth: While some parents choose to terminate a pregnancy upon receiving a diagnosis of Down syndrome, many keep their baby. Assumptions should never be made about a parent's beliefs or decisions. Expectant parents should be provided with up-to-date, accurate information so they may make an informed decision that's right for them.

Myth: Behavior problems and depression are just part of "having Down syndrome" **Truth:** Often, medical or mental health problems go untreated due to the assumption that it is typical of having this genetic condition. Complete examinations by appropriate health care professionals should always be pursued.

Myth: People with Down syndrome need to see a specialist for medical check-ups. **Truth:** A primary care physician can perform regular check-ups on a person with Down syndrome, paying specific attention to some of the medical conditions most commonly experienced by this population. There are Down Syndrome Health Care Guidelines and other resources available that can be used to help treat these patients.

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Myths & Truths About Down Syndrome (continued)

Myth: Down syndrome is hereditary and runs in families.

Truth: Most cases of Down syndrome are sporadic, chance events. However, in translocation (which accounts for three to four percent of cases), one parent may be identified as a carrier of a translocated chromosome. Down syndrome does not otherwise run in families and a sibling or aunt has no greater chance of conceiving a child with Down syndrome. In general, the incidence of having a second child with Down syndrome is about one in 100.

Myth: There is little community support for bringing up a child with Down syndrome.

Truth: In almost every community of the U.S. there are parent support groups and other community organizations directly involved in providing services to families of individuals with Down syndrome.

Myth: Children with Down syndrome are placed in segregated special education programs.

Truth: Children with Down syndrome are included in regular academic classrooms across the country. Students may be integrated into specific courses or fully included in the regular classroom for all subjects. The degree of inclusion is based on the abilities of the individual, but the goal is full inclusion.

Myth: Adults with Down syndrome cannot form interpersonal relationships, marry or have children.

Truth: People with Down syndrome date and marry and it is possible for women with Down syndrome to have children. There is a 50 percent chance that the child will have Down syndrome. While extremely rare, men with Down syndrome can father children.

Myth: Most people with Down syndrome are institutionalized.

Truth: Today people with Down syndrome live at home with their families, in group homes or homes of their own. They are integrated into the regular education system and are active participants in the vocational, social, religious and recreational activities of the community.

Myth: Adults with Down syndrome are unemployable.

Truth: Businesses are seeking young adults with Down syndrome for a variety of positions. They are employed in offices by banks, corporations, nursing homes, hotels and restaurants. They work in the music and entertainment industry. People with Down syndrome bring to their jobs enthusiasm, reliability and dedication.