



January 2025

NON-APPARENT DISABILITIES FACT SHEET:

Prevalence

Introduction

Many disabilities are not immediately apparent, yet they profoundly impact the lives of those who live with them. Non-apparent disabilities challenge traditional perceptions of disability, highlighting the importance of fostering greater understanding and inclusion in all areas of life, including healthcare and the workplace.

Understanding the Term

The use of terms like "invisible" or "hidden" disability carries unintended implications. This fact sheet uses the term *non-apparent disability* to affirm the presence and experiences of individuals whose disabilities may not be outwardly visible.

Legal Context

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals with non-apparent disabilities, recognizing that major life activities extend beyond physical functions to include cognitive, emotional, and social capacities.

The Importance of Recognizing Non-Apparent Disabilities

Given the high prevalence of both visible and non-apparent disabilities, it is likely that most people regularly interact with individuals living with these conditions. Recognizing the scope of these disabilities underscores the necessity of fostering inclusive environments and addressing barriers that may not be immediately visible.

Overview of Disability Prevalence in the U.S.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 61 million U.S. adults—approximately 1 in 4—live with a disability that impacts major aspects of daily life.¹ The CDC categorizes disabilities into six key areas:

- **Mobility:** Serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.
- **Cognition:** Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- **Hearing:** Significant hearing impairments.

A Note on Terminology

While this fact sheet uses *non-apparent disabilities*, many individuals prefer *invisible disabilities* to emphasize the struggle of being overlooked by support systems.

Terminology is personal, and both terms are valid.

- **Vision:** Significant vision impairments.
- **Independent Living:** Challenges completing errands alone.
- **Self-Care:** Difficulty dressing or bathing.

While these categories encompass both visible and non-apparent disabilities, many, such as cognitive and independent living challenges, are often non-apparent but still profoundly affect individuals' lives.

Below is a non-comprehensive list of some disabilities that public health educators might encounter.

Neurodivergence and Cognitive Disabilities

Neurodivergent and cognitive disabilities encompass a wide range of conditions that affect brain function, learning, communication, and social interaction. These disabilities may not be immediately visible but can present significant challenges in everyday life, often requiring specialized support or accommodations.

Disability	Impact on Daily Functioning	Prevalence
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Challenges with communication, sensory processing, and social interaction.	Approximately 1.67% of 8-year-olds have a diagnosis of ASD ² and it is estimated that 2.21% of adults in the U.S. are living with ASD. ³
Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI):	Memory loss, focus difficulties, fatigue, headaches, and other symptoms affecting daily tasks and participation.	About 18% of the U.S. population has experienced a TBI; ⁴ 11.4 million Americans over 40 live with TBI-related disability. ⁵
Serious Mental Health Conditions	Emotional regulation, decision-making, and productivity can be significantly affected.	15.4 million U.S. adults (6% of the population) experience serious mental illness. ⁶

Chronic Illnesses and Systemic Conditions Disabilities

Chronic illnesses and systemic conditions are often non-apparent but can profoundly impact an individual's quality of life and ability to participate fully in daily activities. These conditions may require long-term management, including medical treatments, lifestyle adjustments, and workplace flexibility.



Disability	Impact on Daily Functioning	Prevalence
Diabetes	Requires strict blood sugar management with testing and insulin administration. Unmanaged diabetes can cause fatigue, impaired vision, heart disease, kidney disease, and neuropathy.	38.1 million U.S. adults live with diabetes. ⁷
Chronic Pain	Conditions like fibromyalgia or arthritis limit mobility and cause constant discomfort, fatigue, affecting work and personal life.	51.6 million adults (20.9%) experience chronic pain, with 17.1 million (6.9%) experiencing pain severe enough to substantially limit daily activities. ⁸
Epilepsy	Recurrent seizures interrupt daily activities and may require environments free of seizure triggers like flashing lights or high stress.	2.9 million U.S. adults (1%) aged 18+ had active epilepsy in 2021-2022. ⁹

Functional and Sensory Disabilities

Functional and sensory disabilities encompass conditions that affect physical stamina, sensory perception, or the ability to interact with one’s environment. These disabilities may require accommodations such as assistive technologies, modified environments, or increased awareness in interpersonal communication.

Disability	Impact on Daily Functioning	Prevalence
Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS/ME)	Persistent fatigue makes sustained activity challenging, impacting stamina, concentration, social engagement, work, and daily living.	1.3% of adults in the U.S. had CFS/ME in 2021–2022. ¹⁰
Migraines	Severe, recurrent headaches cause sensory sensitivity, impeding social interaction, daily functioning, and productivity.	Over a 3-month period, roughly 1 out of 6 Americans and 1 in 5 women experience migraines or severe headaches. ¹¹
Hearing Loss or Auditory Processing Disorders	Challenges in understanding verbal communication, safety cues, especially in noisy environments.	Approximately 30 million U.S. adults (13%) have hearing loss in both ears. ¹²



Why Accommodations Matter

Non-apparent disabilities often go unrecognized because they lack visible markers, but their impact on individuals' daily lives is profound. Accommodations can:

- **Foster Inclusion:** Enable individuals with disabilities to fully participate in workplaces, schools, and public spaces in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- **Improve Accessibility:** Small adjustments can make significant differences, such as:
 - **Flexible Work Hours:** Help individuals manage chronic fatigue or mental health conditions.
 - **Quiet or Sensory-Friendly Spaces:** Support those with autism or migraines in navigating environments.
 - **Digital Accessibility:** Providing meeting transcripts or alternative communication options for those with auditory processing disorders.

By raising awareness and prioritizing accessibility, we create environments where everyone can thrive. These efforts not only enhance productivity and well-being but also demonstrate a commitment to equity and respect for all individuals.

Author

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- ³ Dietz, P.M., Rose, C.E., McArthur, D., Maenner, M. (2020) National and State Estimates of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *J Autism Dev Disord*, 50(12):4258-4266. doi: 10.1007/s10803-020-04494-4.
- ⁴ Karamian, A., Lucke-Wold, B., Seifi, A. (2024) Prevalence of Traumatic Brain Injury in the General Adult Population of the USA: A Meta-Analysis. *Neuroepidemiology*, 1-10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000540676>
- ⁵ Schneider, A.L.C., Wang, D., Gottesman, R.F., Selvin, E. (2021) Prevalence of Disability Associated With Head Injury With Loss of Consciousness in Adults in the United States: A Population-Based Study. *Neurology*.97(2):e124-e135. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1212/WNL.0000000000012148>
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- ⁷ CDC. (2024, May 15). *National Diabetes Statistics Report*. Centers for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/php/data-research/index.html#:~:text=Among%20the%20U.S.%20population%20overall,Table%201a%3B%20Table%201b>.
- ⁸ CDC. (2023, April 14). *Chronic Pain Among Adults — United States, 2019–2021*. Centers for Disease Control. [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7215a1.htm#:~:text=Between%202019%20and%202021%2C%20the,to%207.8%25%20\(Figure\)](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7215a1.htm#:~:text=Between%202019%20and%202021%2C%20the,to%207.8%25%20(Figure)).
- ⁹ CDC. (2024, May 15). *Epilepsy Facts and Stats*. Center for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/epilepsy/data-research/facts-stats/index.html>
- ¹⁰ CDC. (2023, Dec). *Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Adults: United States, 2021–2022*. Center for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db488.htm#:~:text=In%202021%E2%80%932022%2C%201.3%25,of%20their%20place%20of%20residence>
- ¹¹ Burch, R., Rizzoli, P., Loder, E. (2018) The Prevalence and Impact of Migraine and Severe Headache in the United States: Figures and Trends From Government Health Studies. *Headache*. 58(4), 496-505. <http://doi.org/10.1111/head.13281>
- ¹² NIH. (2024, Sept 20). Quick Statistics About Hearing, Balance, & Dizziness. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing#5>

