

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people with bowel conditions such as irritable bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome and coeliac disease

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Introduction

What are bowel conditions?

Bowel conditions affect parts of the digestive system and how the body absorbs and digests food and gets rid of waste. Different conditions impact different areas of the small and large intestine (which forms the bowel); they have different symptoms and impact individuals differently.

Living with bowel conditions

Unpredictable flare-ups, regular check-ups and the taboo that surrounds some of these conditions mean that living with bowel conditions can be difficult at times. Many people find it difficult to talk about their condition and symptoms to others, although an increased awareness of these conditions makes these conversations easier to have.

About Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are chronic conditions where an overactive immune system causes parts of the digestive system to become inflamed and ulcerated. Crohn's disease can affect any part of the digestive system from the mouth to the anus. Ulcerative colitis only affects the colon and rectum.

The exact causes of these conditions are currently unknown and there is no cure at present. Treatment can help reduce or control symptoms, reducing the occurrence of flare-ups, but can also cause serious side effects.

Each person's experience of Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis will be different. The disease is ongoing and symptoms are likely to include pain, diarrhoea often mixed with blood, severe tiredness and weight loss. It can affect almost every part of the body from hormones and digestion to energy levels and mental health.

More than 300,000 people in the UK are affected by Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, with women being slightly more affected than men.[1] Diagnosis usually occurs between the ages of 15 and 25. If someone is diagnosed early in life, their education or early career might be disrupted.

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is an umbrella term encompassing Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and microscopic colitis.[2]

Some people who undergo surgery for IBD may require a stoma to alleviate their symptoms. A stoma is an artificial opening that will bring the end of the intestine to the surface of the abdomen so that digestive waste products are diverted into a pouch rather than being discharged via the anus. Stomas can be temporary or permanent.

[1] Crohn's & Colitis UK

[2] For more information on microscopic colitis

What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common condition also affecting the digestive system; it is more common in women than men^[3] and can potentially have a big impact on people's life. It is estimated that IBS affects 20% of the UK population, with only a quarter of individuals affected seeking medical advice.^[4]

IBS causes severe abdominal cramps, constipation and diarrhoea and severe bloating. Lack of energy, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, nausea, flatulence, backache, sudden urges to pee and not being able to control when you poo are other symptoms that people with IBS may experience. Anxiety and depression are also commonly mentioned as being associated with IBS. The wide range of symptoms means that there is no distinctive pathology and no single effective treatment.

The root cause of this lifelong condition is still unknown. IBS is a fluctuating condition where symptoms will vary from one day to another with unexpected flare-ups. Although not everybody is able to identify their triggers, some find that particular food and drinks as well as stress can trigger flare-ups.

Recent studies from Monash University Australia provides some developments on the type of foods that can trigger IBS symptoms in some. These foods are grouped under the term 'FODMAP' (fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols) and for some, a low FODMAP diet can help identify specific food triggers.^[5]

[3] What is IBS? - The IBS Network

[4] UK Research and Innovation

[5] What are FODMAPS? - The IBS Network

Coeliac disease

This autoimmune condition is caused by an adverse reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. It is not an allergy or an intolerance to gluten and there is currently no cure for coeliac disease. It is estimated that 1% of the population in the UK has coeliac disease but less than a quarter of those are diagnosed.[6]

People with coeliac disease find that switching to a gluten free diet helps control their symptoms. When people are undiagnosed or continue to eat gluten, even in tiny amounts, long term complications such as malabsorption and malnutrition can occur. These complications can lead to other conditions such as osteoporosis, iron deficiency anaemia and, more rarely, increased risk of bowel cancer.

Pregnancy-related complications can also occur when coeliac disease is not controlled.[7]

[6] How common is coeliac disease? - Coeliac UK

[7] Pregnancy - Coeliac UK

Employment and people with bowel conditions

Many people with bowel conditions will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but will not consider themselves to be disabled.

Nevertheless, employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities such as bowel conditions mean that specific barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place. Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with bowel conditions for positions.

People may acquire bowel conditions during the course of their employment. Managers need to be able to respond sensibly to individuals who have recently been diagnosed.

Being diagnosed with a specific condition can take months or years and it is important for businesses to support their employees in this process by discussing possible adjustments with their employees as soon as possible.

It is important that employers have an honest conversation with new and existing employees about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make reasonable adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in coming up with solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact Business Disability Forum's Advice Service on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Most people, once they understand their condition, are inventive in developing coping strategies that enable them to work effectively.

Decisions about suitability for employment, promotion or retention are too often based on general assumptions or misconceptions, rather than a factual assessment. This can lead to discrimination against existing or potential employees. Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems and making decisions.

The vast majority of people with bowel conditions have no problems at work. The employer may not even be aware that they have bowel conditions. However, for some people a few minor adjustments could be needed. Adjustments will vary from one individual to another depending on the condition they have and how it affects them personally.

Recruitment and selection

Candidates with bowel conditions may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to make reasonable adjustments. It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about reasonable adjustments they may require. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Further information on best practice for recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident scheme; for further information, visit: disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number +44-(0)20-7403-3020 or by email advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk.

Remember it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Job descriptions

When drawing up job descriptions and candidate specifications:

- Be specific about what skills are needed and what the job involves.
- Be flexible. Very often minor changes can make a significant difference.
- Do not needlessly exclude someone with bowel conditions. Concentrate on what is to be achieved in a job rather than on how it is achieved.

Advertising and attracting applicants

When advertising a job:

- Use positive wording like “we welcome disabled applicants” or, for Partners and Members of BDF: “We are a Member of Business Disability Forum and committed to becoming a disability-smart employer’.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, using a range of contact methods, e.g. email and telephone.
- Display or mention the Disability Confident symbol if you have signed up to the scheme.
- Be clear that you are willing to make reasonable adjustments.
- Consult your local Jobcentre Plus which can help you make your recruitment process accessible. As well as advising on your recruitment process, Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus will also know of individuals with bowel conditions who may be suitable candidates. Business Disability Forum Members and Partners can contact us for help.

Application forms

Adjustments may need to be made to the shortlisting process because an applicant may:

- Apply for a job for which they are over qualified because they need to regain confidence.
- Have gaps in their CV due to their condition.
- Have gained experience outside of paid employment, e.g. work experience and voluntary work.

Interviews, tests and assessment centres

Ensure that candidates who have bowel conditions are able to demonstrate their ability to do the job and what they can contribute to your organisation. Focus on the person's abilities not on the person's bowel condition. If you have any doubts about a person's ability to do an intrinsic function of the job simply ask how they would do it.

When you invite applicants for an interview make sure you ask all candidates if they require any adjustments to be made for the interview, so they are able to perform to the best of their abilities:

- Provide somewhere to store medication and food, if necessary, for example at an assessment centre or job interview.
- Allow flexibility in terms of interview times or breaks during a day's assessment as a predictable routine may be vital to those who need to follow a specific diet.
- Ensure toilets are available close to where the assessment will take place and allow candidates to use the toilets when needed.

Post job-offer

Once someone has been offered a job you may need to make adjustments to ensure they can perform to the best of their ability. Start getting the adjustments in place as soon as practicable after you have made an appointment – it may take time to set up reasonable adjustments and, in some instances, to secure Access to Work funding. Consult the individual and make sure the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. Appropriate disability awareness training can be useful for the candidate's team but only if the individual is comfortable with this.

Building in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervisory sessions and performance appraisals, will help ensure that the adjustments are still effective.

Ensure that you take the same approach to adjustments when a person with bowel conditions applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

Completing a 'tailored adjustment plan' with new employees who have a disability or with an employee who develops a disability is a good way of recording and reviewing adjustments that have been agreed and actions that will be taken if the employee is off sick.

To see an example of a tailored adjustment plan and to download a template, visit Business Disability Forum's website at **businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or contact Business Disability Forum's Advice Service on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Working arrangements to retain employees

In most cases the only adjustment required is an increased understanding of bowel conditions by those in the workplace. It is very important to involve the person concerned when considering or making any workplace adjustment. If required, further adjustments may include:

- Regular work schedules, breaks and meal breaks – a predictable routine may be vital to people with bowel conditions.
- Flexible working patterns – allow individuals to work from home when they have a flare-up whenever possible.
- Allowing staff to eat or snack at their workstation if they need to consume food at regular intervals. If this is not possible for hygiene reasons, allow individuals to take regular short breaks.
- Somewhere to store medication and food, such as a fridge. Encourage all staff to appropriately wrap their food to reduce risk of contaminations.
- Allowing time off to attend medical appointments, rehabilitation or assessments, see our 'Managing sickness absence' Briefing for more information.
- Reallocation of inessential duties to other team members.
- Redeployment to an alternative position/employment/premises.

Induction, training and development

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies such as policies on sickness, training and performance appraisals.

New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction procedure.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme is accessible, so an employee with bowel conditions can access the same information as everyone else. You may also want to provide a workplace mentor to ensure supportive training. This can provide another employee with valuable personal development.

Ensure that employees with bowel conditions have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

Harassment

A person who has a bowel condition may be particularly vulnerable to harassment from their colleagues. As an employer, you must take all reasonable steps to deal with harassment. Harassment includes not only physical or verbal abuse but also anything which violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading humiliating or offensive environment.

Harassment stems from stereotyping, lack of understanding, intolerance of difference and fear. To prevent bullying and harassment of anyone you should:

- Ensure your organisation has clear policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively. Ensure these policies are communicated across the organisation through campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
- Make it clear that any harassment, including on grounds of disability, will not be tolerated and that offenders will be dealt with through your disciplinary procedures.
- Ensure management understands that people who have bowel conditions experience increased risk of harassment and provide training for line managers to help them to identify and manage incidents connected to bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Make the employee aware of their right to equal treatment, their entitlement to make a complaint and to initiate a grievance.
- Allow employees access to support networks internally or externally from work. If possible ensure employees who have experienced bullying or harassment have access to professional and confidential counselling.
- Ensure appropriate disability awareness training is implemented across your workforce to challenge stereotyping.

Further sources of reference

Useful organisations

Business Disability Forum

Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street,
London SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Website: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Business Disability Forum (BDF) is a not-for-profit membership organisation that supports businesses to recruit and retain disabled employees and serve disabled customers.

Business Disability Forum provides pragmatic support, expertise, advice, training and networking opportunities between businesses. Our aim is to transform the life chances – and experience – of disabled people as employees and consumers.



Crohn's & Colitis UK

1 Bishops Square,
Hatfield Business Park, AL10 9NE

Tel: +44-(0)300-222-5700

Email: info@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk

Website: crohnsandcolitis.org.uk

Crohn's and Colitis UK is a charity dedicated to Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and other forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). It provides information and support to enable people to manage their conditions. They work with the UK health sector to improve diagnosis as well as fund research to increase knowledge of causes and best treatments.

Business Disability Forum gratefully acknowledges the help of Crohn's & Colitis with the advice and guidance included in this Briefing.

The IBS network

Unit 1.16 SOAR Works,
14 Knutton Road,
Sheffield, S5 9NU

Email: info@theibsnetwork.org

Website: theibsnetwork.org

The IBS network is the UK's national charity for people with IBS. It offers information, advice and support for patients with IBS as well as for health care professionals.

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