

Briefing

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

Employment adjustments for people with bowel conditions

This briefing is not an authoritative statement of the law. While we have made every effort to ensure that the information we have provided is correct, Business Disability Forum cannot accept any responsibility or liability.

Contents

Introduction	4
Employment and people with bowel conditions	8
Reasonable adjustments and best practice	10
Induction, training and development	15
Harassment	16
Further sources of reference	17
Contact us	20

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.

Employment adjustments for people with bowel conditions

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.

Employment adjustments for people with bowel conditions

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.

**Content has been removed
for sample purposes. Pages
11 to 18 are available in the
full booklet.**

**© 2018 This publication and the information
contained therein are subject to copyright and
remain the property of Business Disability Forum.
They are for reference only and must not be
reproduced, copied or distributed without
prior permission.**

**Business Disability Forum is committed to ensuring that all
its products and services are as accessible as possible to
everyone. If you wish to discuss anything with regard to
accessibility, please contact us.**

**Company limited by guarantee with charitable objects.
Registered Charity No: 1018463.
Registered in England No: 2603700.**



Contact us

Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY

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

Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404

Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Web: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk