

**HEALTH MANAGEMENT  
INSIGHTS**

# Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Inflammatory Bowel Disease or IBD is a condition which can affect not only the bowels but also other parts of the body including the joints and eyes. There are two main types: - Crohn's Disease and Ulcerative Colitis (UC). Of these, UC is the more common affecting roughly 240/100,000 of the UK population, for Crohn's the figure is 157/100,000.

## Key takeaways for managers and HR professionals

- > Although the names are similar, Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) is a completely separate and usually more severe condition than Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).
- > IBD has two variants; Ulcerative Colitis, which only affects the large bowel, and Crohn's Disease, which can affect any part of the gastrointestinal tract.
- > IBD can have effects beyond the alimentary system. It can affect both the eyes and joints and cause poor absorption of food, leading to vitamin and mineral deficiencies and fatigue.
- > Treatment for IBD includes medications, (many of which can lower general immunity to infections) and surgery. Employees may require long term hospital care with a specialist.
- > If acute, symptoms may be considered a disability under relevant legislation.
- > Workplace adjustments (see below) do not need to be complex or expensive to make a big difference to individuals and help maintain their performance and productivity.
- > We can provide bespoke occupational health advice to employers and employees.

## Information about the Conditions

In cases of UC the main area of the bowel affected is the large bowel or colon, but in the case of Crohn's, any part of the digestive tract from the mouth to the back passage can be affected. Both conditions are episodic, with acute exacerbations separated by remission or periods of less active disease. It is estimated that **50%** of people with UC will have at least one relapse per year, of which **80%** are mild to moderate but **20%** are severe. IBD typically starts in the late teens to early 30s but can occur at any stage of life and there may be a genetic disposition, with other family members being affected.

### Symptoms of IBD are variable but include:

gastrointestinal pain, diarrhoea, bleeding (which can be severe leading to anaemia), poor absorption of food with associated reduction in weight and bone density/ bone strength, fatigue, mouth ulcers, IBD related arthritis, IBD related eye problems, abscesses, bowel perforation and fissures. Associated fatigue is common, and as a chronic illness, can affect general wellbeing and mood. In addition, UC sufferers are at slightly higher risk of developing bowel tumours.

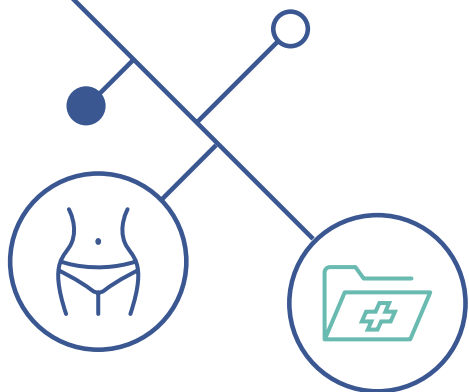
It is important not to confuse IBD with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Although IBS can be very troublesome for some sufferers, it does not have the ulceration, bleeding and inflammation associated with IBD, nor does it affect other systems outside of the bowel (although the underlying condition leading to IBS symptoms may do so).

Treatments for IBD are varied and may include major surgery. The main forms of treatment are based on medications reducing the immune response - including steroids and other medications that subdue the immune response.

New treatments are now becoming available for cases where remission has not been achieved by usual therapies. The newer agents are based on a family of medications known as 'Biologics' which employ monoclonal antibodies.



These may require specific administration and monitoring, however they have shown promising results.





## IBD and Work

Given the chronic nature of the condition and its impact on the daily activities of sufferers, it is important to consider possible adjustments. Although a legal decision will ultimately determine each case, it should be assumed that the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010 are likely to apply.



IBD can have a significant effect at work.

For all IBD sufferers, easy access to bathroom facilities is vital, as well as regular breaks to access the toilet quickly if needed. Such adjustments may require careful consideration if travel is involved or if the employee has a long commute to work. Some employees may have to deal with a stoma bag post-surgery, which would necessitate suitable facilities in which to manage this.

Employees will need time to attend their appointments with their treating clinicians (including IBD specialist nurses) when these appointments can not be arranged outside of office hours. These appointments may include investigations or specialist treatments, which may require preparation time beforehand.

If recurrent appointments are needed when beginning a course of medication, then discussion with the line manager in advance is helpful as this allows time to investigate ways to manage this within the business. IBD specialist nurses are an important point of call for IBD patients, especially when a change in symptoms occurs.

If symptoms are severe or employees experience an exacerbation, both working from home and flexible working, if available, may be helpful. It is also possible that a period of sickness absence may be required if symptoms are particularly severe, especially if hospital admission becomes necessary. In such cases, consideration of adjustments to sickness absence triggers may be supportive.

Treatments (including steroids and the newer agents) can affect the immune system, therefore it is helpful to undertake a risk assessment for lowered immunity, aiming to reduce co-incidental infection risks. This would include vulnerability to COVID-19.



Finally, it is important to consider the secondary effects of this condition, including any arthritis, effect on mood and general fatigue. These symptoms can be especially debilitating. Regular breaks and the tailoring of workload to accommodate levels of fatigue is helpful, in cases of arthritic side effects. We can provide personalised advice, including workstation adjustments and changes to manual aspects of a role.



Where an Employee Assistance programme is available this can also give support.

## Help at Hand

The Crohn's and Colitis Association provide in-depth advice guides for both employers and employees, which is regularly updated.

[Information for employers](#)

[Information for employees](#)

IBD is a complex and multifaceted condition and it is important not to confuse it with IBS. Employees with IBD can benefit from suitable workplace support in helping them to manage their condition and maintain an effective workplace presence.

## References

- > [Crohns and Colitis](#)
- > [NICE](#)
- > [Patient Info](#)

 [healthmanagement.co.uk/](http://healthmanagement.co.uk/)

