

## HEALTH MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

# Understanding Functional Disorders

Functional neurological disorders (or FNDs) are bodily symptoms which appear to be caused by problems in the nervous system, but which are not caused by a physical neurological disease or disorder.

They are, in fact, very common – around 1/3 of patients seen at NHS neurology clinics have a functional disorder. Yet public knowledge about FNDs is limited, and very little guidance is available to employers aiming to supporting staff with these difficulties.

## How functional neurological disorders are experienced

Functional disorders can vary widely in their impact, ranging from mild symptoms and no associated disability through to severe symptoms and marked disability. So a diagnosis of an FND can be challenging for both employee and employer.

Symptoms may include pain, fatigue, limb weakness, numbness, shaking or blackouts, along with gastrointestinal or cardiac symptoms.

The diagnosis with a functional disorder can be frustrating as these disorders are yet to be explained by a recognised disease and investigations of the symptoms usually yield

‘normal’ results. However, these are recognised within the spectrum of mental disorders and are not ‘imagined’, and the difficulties for the person experiencing them are certainly real.

It’s unclear why people develop functional problems, although genetic traits, psychological components and adverse life experiences are all believed to be contributing factors.

Equality legislation may apply to these disorders if they are causing a long-term and substantial impairment, requiring an employer to investigate reasonable adjustments to support their employee at work.

# The Treatment Pathway

Treatment involves a multi-faceted approach which entails an understanding and acceptance of the condition on the part of the individual, along with symptom and functional impairment management. This typically includes physiotherapy and both occupational and psychological therapies. Prognosis and recovery outcomes vary widely but the disabilities arising from FNDs are potentially reversible.

## How employees with functional disorders may be affected

An employee with a functional disorder may experience a variety of physical, sensory and cognitive symptoms that can affect them at work.

### Examples of some common functional disorders:

- > Chronic Pain
- > Non-epileptic attack disorder (NEAD)
- > Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- > Chronic fatigue syndrome
- > Fibromyalgia

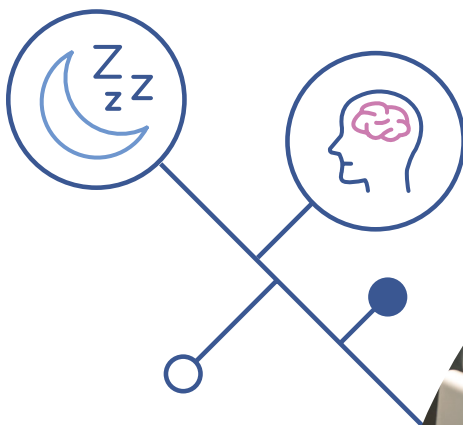
## How can an employer help?

In the first instance, employers can accept and recognise the difficulties experienced by employees with FNDs, and ensuring a positive and supportive work environment is likewise beneficial. If employees feel that their condition is not taken seriously, this may, of itself, act as a contributing factor to the illness.

Those affected commonly face complex and interacting problems within the workplace, for instance; fatigue, impaired concentration, mobility issues and even events which can resemble a seizure. The individual may need support within the workplace to enable them to work as effectively as possible. This should be discussed openly and directly with the employee.



Remember that everybody's condition will be experienced differently.





Depending on the nature of the job and the condition, you may need to consider restrictions for your employee at work. For example, it would not be advisable for a person who has NEAD and intermittent impaired consciousness to undertake safety critical duties, drive, or work with dangerous machinery. A health and safety risk assessment can help you determine which restrictions may be necessary or appropriate.

**If you are unsure how best to support an employee with a functional disorder, then consider a referral to an Occupational Health provider who can make an assessment and provide bespoke individualised advice and recommendations.**

**You may find the following links helpful with regard to supporting employees with mental health issues in the workplace:**

- > [Functional Neurological Disorders](#)
- > [FNDAction](#)



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

