



# PEOPLE WITH EPISODIC DISABILITIES IN THE CANADIAN WORKPLACE: A FACT SHEET

Episodic disabilities (EDs) are long-term conditions that are characterized by periods of **good** health interrupted by periods of illness and disability. These periods may vary in severity, length and predictability. Unlike permanent disabilities, episodic disabilities are periodic—the episodes of illness come and go. But because the periods of illness and disability are unpredictable, they can often be

challenging to deal with in work settings, especially when accommodations are needed to support the person's ongoing participation in the workplace.

An increased commitment to enable the full participation of persons with disabilities in schools, workplaces, and our communities is evident across Canada. Awareness has been building and policies and practices that focus on inclusion and diversity are being developed and implemented. The reality for many Canadians who have chronic health conditions characterized by unpredictable periods of illness and diminished capacity followed by periods of wellness remain unacknowledged. Individuals with episodic conditions including arthritis, mental health difficulties, migraines, MS and other conditions can be effective at work and in their daily lives much of the time, but also experience periods that may require time off work, reduced work hours, or other accommodations.

This fact sheet is based on data from Statistics Canada's 2012 Canadian Survey of Disability.

## PEOPLE WITH EPISODIC DISABILITIES IN CANADA: AN OVERVIEW

- In 2012, there were 2.283 million working age Canadians, age 18 – 64, with a disability. Almost 1.9 million or 82.4% of people with a disability had a chronic health condition that was episodic in nature who experience both episodes when their capacity to function is diminished as well as periods when they can function at full capacity.
- Episodic health conditions that result from illness or injury are more common among adult Canadians in their peak earning years (aged 45-64 years), although almost one third (31.4% or 591,800) are aged 18-44.
- More women than men (56% vs 44%) have an episodic disability.
- People with episodic disabilities are a diverse group with a range of needs and capacities. Many have more than one health condition with pain being the condition that most often limits their daily activities.
- Almost 800,000 Canadians with episodic disabilities (32.3%) report having a mental health diagnosis such as depression or anxiety that typically occurs with one or more physical disabilities.

# PEOPLE WITH EPISODIC DISABILITIES IN THE CANADIAN WORKPLACE

In 2012, among working-age adults in Canada aged 18 to 64 years with episodic disabilities:

- Just over half were in the labour force, with 45.4% working at a job or business, while another 5% were unemployed and actively seeking work. The remainder included 382,300 (20.3%) who described themselves as retired and 550,300 who were not in the labour force but felt that they might be able to work with appropriate flexibility and support.
- Of the 854,000 Canadians with episodic disabilities who worked at a job or business in 2012, almost 82% (700,000) were employed; another 18% (151,000) were self-employed, and just 0.3% (3,000 people) worked without pay in a family business.
- Most employees with episodic disabilities (77%) were employed on a full-time basis and 72.4% had “permanent” or continuing jobs.
- More than 181,000 Canadians with episodic disabilities (21.2%) had jobs that Statistics Canada designates as managers or professionals.
- More than 230,300 (26.9%) people with episodic disabilities were employed in public sector and quasi public-sector industries (health and social assistance, educational services, and public administration); another 113,300 people (13.3%) were employed in retail trade, while manufacturing, construction, and management of companies and enterprises accounted for 7.5%, 6.8%, and 6.0% of employees with episodic disabilities, respectively. Just under 46,000 Canadians with episodic disabilities (5.4%) worked in accommodation and food services.
- Almost three out of five (59.2%) employees with episodic disabilities have a post-secondary credential: 39.2% have a college certificate or diploma, and 20% have a university degree.
- The majority of employees with episodic disabilities reported having their current job for a considerable amount of time: 385,500 (46.3%) had been in their job for 12 years or longer, while 77,700 (9.3%) had their current job for between 5 and 12 years. Slightly more than 18% (151,400) had been employed in their current job for between 3 and 5 years, while 26% (217,800) had started their present job in the last one or two years.

## WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH EPISODIC DISABILITIES

Some people with episodic disabilities benefit from having flexible work options and some accommodations for those times when they are not able to work full time or need time off from work. Others may not feel comfortable disclosing their circumstances or fear that by doing so, they may put their job or career opportunities at risk.

In 2012, among Canadian employees aged 18 to 64 years with episodic disabilities:

- Approximately two thirds (462,300) of employees disclosed their condition to their employer or supervisor.
- 53% of employees with episodic disabilities (371,200) reported that they needed some

workplace accommodation.

- As is the case for persons with disabilities generally, employees with episodic disabilities who needed some form of workplace accommodation most often said they needed a “soft” accommodation such as modified hours or days or reduced work weeks and/or the opportunity to work from home at times. In 2012, 67% of the 700,000 employees with episodic disabilities required one or more of these “soft” accommodations.
- Personal accommodations such as a special chair or a modified work station also work well for many people with episodic disabilities. Just over half (57%) of employees with episodic disabilities required a personal accommodation in 2012.
- Structural accommodations in the workplace were required for only 16% of employees with episodic disabilities in 2012. Structural accommodations are physical modifications to the workspace that provide physical access and may include things like an accessible elevator, ramps, or another physical modification.

## GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

- There are considerable gaps in the research on Canadians with episodic disabilities. Little is known about how employers, supervisors and co-workers respond to employees’ needs for intermittent accommodations – and especially what creative solutions are used to support their ongoing effectiveness in the workplace.
- We also know little about the barriers employers and employees with episodic disabilities face that could be addressed through, for example, changes in employer-provided benefit programs or short-term disability policies.
- Another gap in our knowledge is how to best support small businesses and non-profit organizations in their efforts to accommodate people with episodic disabilities.

## RESOURCES

More information on episodic disabilities in the Canadian workplace can be found on the following websites:

From Invisibility to Inclusion: Episodic Disability in the Ontario Workplace  
[invisibility2inclusion.ca](http://invisibility2inclusion.ca)

Episodic Disabilities Employment Network  
[edencanada.ca](http://edencanada.ca)

Realize | Réalise  
[realizecanada.org/](http://realizecanada.org/)

*This fact sheet was prepared for i2i by Professor Donna Lero, University of Guelph and Adele Furrie, Adele Furrie Consulting Inc. in April 2018.*