



# CANADIANS WITH DISABILITIES WHO EXPERIENCE EPISODIC LIMITATIONS IN CANADA: A FACT SHEET

For the past three decades, Statistics Canada has been collecting and disseminating information about Canadians who are living with disabilities. The focus of those surveys has been to measure the nature and extent of the barriers encountered by Canadians with disabilities that prevent or impede their ability to fully participate in their community. Different lenses have been

used when disseminating this information, e.g., type of disability, severity of disability, age, gender, and employment. The 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability marks the first time that questions were included to determine if the barriers experienced by Canadians with disabilities differ depending on whether their limitations change over time and are episodic or if they are continuous.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the 2,292,700 Canadians aged 25 to 64 who experience limitations that are episodic and the impact that these episodic limitations have on their ability to obtain and retain employment in the Canadian workforce.

## CANADIANS WITH DISABILITIES WHO EXPERIENCE EPISODIC LIMITATIONS – WHO ARE THEY?

In 2017, among persons with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years, 2,292,700 (62%) experienced episodic limitations and the remaining 1,389,900 (38%) experienced continuous limitations.

- Episodic limitations are more common among adult Canadians with disabilities who are in their peak earning years (aged 45 to 64 years) – 1,460,100 or 64%. Slightly more than a third of Canadians with episodic limitations are aged 25-44.
- More women than men (57% vs 43%) have a disability that results in episodic limitations.
- People with disabilities who experience episodic limitations are a diverse group with a range of needs and capacities. Many report more than one type of disability or chronic health condition. A large proportion (72% or 1,648,000) report that pain is one of the factors that most often limits their daily activities.
- Just over four out of ten (43% or 953,800) persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations report being limited by a mental health condition such as anxiety or depression, often in addition to a physical condition.
- 59% (1,309,000) of Canadians with disabilities who experience episodic limitations have a post-secondary certificate or diploma.
- 15% (346,500) are living in households where the household income was below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off.

# CANADIANS WITH DISABILITIES WHO EXPERIENCE EPISODIC LIMITATIONS – HOW DO THEY FARE IN THE WORKPLACE?

People with disabilities who experience episodic limitations have flare-ups that can vary in severity, length, and predictability. The unpredictability of episodic disabilities can often be challenging to deal with in the workplace, especially if an accommodation is required to support the individual during the flare-up.

In 2017, among adults with disabilities age 25-64 who experience episodic limitations:

- 54% (1,235,400) were employed, 6% (147,300) were unemployed and actively seeking work, and 40% (911,700) were not in the labour force.
- There were 413,000 “potential workers” with episodic limitations. They include persons who were unemployed, who said they would look for work in the next 12 months, and those who felt they could work if they received the necessary accommodation.
- Among the 1,546,100 persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations who worked between 2015 and 2017, 30% (456,100) were employed in the public or quasi-public sectors (health and social assistance, educational services, and public administration); 11% were employed in retail trade; 8% were employed in manufacturing; 7% were employed in professional, scientific and technical occupations; and 7% were employed in construction.
- 84% of persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations were employees; 16% were self-employed.
- Most employed persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations (79%) were employed on a full-time basis; 88% reported that their job was permanent rather than seasonal, temporary or on contract.
- About 23% were underemployed. 77% reported that their current position afforded the opportunity to use all of their education, skills and/or work experience and 70% (688,600) report that their current position required the level of education they had.
- Among the 1,030,700 Canadians with episodic limitations who were employees,
  - 54% reported having their current job for more than five years.
  - 35% were members of a union or covered by a union contract or collective agreement.
  - The majority (61%) worked in a small business or at a location where there were fewer than 100 employees: 30% (less than 20 employees), 31% (20 to 99 employees). The remainder were almost evenly divided: 21% worked at a location where there were 100 - 500 employees and 19% worked at locations where there were more than 500 employees.
  - 41% believed that it would be difficult or very difficult to change jobs or advance in their present job. Among the 422,800 individuals who believed that it would be difficult or very difficult to change jobs or advance in their present job, 39% believed that adapting to a new work environment would be difficult and 36% said that their condition limits the number of hours that they can work.
  - 68% have disclosed their condition to their employer.

# CANADIANS WITH DISABILITIES WHO EXPERIENCE EPISODIC LIMITATIONS – ARE ACCOMMODATIONS NEEDED?

Questions about accommodation in the workplace were asked of persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations who were employed or actively seeking employment, as well as those who were not actively seeking employment but, with an accommodation, would consider doing so.

- 49% or 815,300 persons with disabilities who experience episodic limitations said they required an accommodation in the workplace.
- As is the case for persons with disabilities generally, employees with disabilities who experience episodic limitations who needed some form of workplace accommodation most often said they needed a “soft” accommodation such as modified hours or days and/or the opportunity to work from home at times. In 2017, 80% of employees with episodic disabilities required one or more of these “soft” accommodations.<sup>1</sup>
- 54% of employees with disabilities who required a workplace accommodation required a personal accommodation such as human support (such as a sign language interpreter, job coach or personal assistant); technical aids, a computer, laptop or tablet with specialized software or other adaptations; communication aids (such as large print reading materials or recording equipment); a modified or ergonomic workstation, specialized chair or back support, or specialized transportation.
- 15% of employees with disabilities who required a workplace accommodation required a structural accommodation such as adapted or accessible parking, an accessible washroom, or an accessible elevator.

## GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

- There are considerable gaps in the research on Canadians with disabilities who experience episodic limitations. 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 limitations face that could be addressed through, for example, changes in employer-provided benefit programs or short-term disability leave policies.
- An important gap in our knowledge is how to best support small businesses and non-profit organizations in their efforts to accommodate people with episodic limitations.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these accommodations have been crucial for most employees during 2020-2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Additional gaps that I2I researchers are currently addressing involve gaining a better understanding of:
  - how individuals with disabilities who experience episodic limitations self-manage the demands of their workplace to be effective at work while not jeopardizing their health,
  - the needs and experiences of self-employed individuals with disabilities who experience episodic limitations who have a fluctuating income and lack access to public protections such as EI benefits, and
  - employers' and employees' perceptions of factors that promote or impede inclusion and effective accommodation.

## RESOURCES

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

i2i - From Invisibility to Inclusion: Episodic Disability in the Ontario Workplace  
[invisibility2inclusion.ca](http://invisibility2inclusion.ca)

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

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

ACED - Accommodating and Communicating about Episodic Disabilities  
[aced.iwh.on.ca](http://aced.iwh.on.ca)

*This fact sheet was prepared for i2i by Professor Donna Lero, University of Guelph and Adele Furrie, Adele Furrie Consulting Inc. in July 2021 based on data from Statistics Canada's 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability.*