

MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN IN THE WORKPLACE



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Disclaimer

This information sheet is intended to provide general information and is not intended to provide or replace legal advice. If you have questions about your legal rights and responsibilities, you may want to contact a lawyer. The Supreme Court of BC, Online Help Guide provides a list of free and low-cost legal services: supremecourtbc.ca/civil-law/overview/free-and-low-cost-legal-services

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INTRODUCTION

Chronic pain is a leading source of work disability in organizations. According to the Canadian Survey on Disabilities, more than half of working-age adults in pain are employed (Golseren, 2022). Depending on the requirements of the job and the nature of one’s pain condition, individuals may experience increased pain, and its associated symptoms, due to their work. However, maintaining employment provides the financial means to access pain management resources. Work can also serve as a place to engage in valuable social interactions, increase self-esteem, and provide meaning to one’s life which can improve health outcomes. If you are one of the many people who are living with chronic pain and are employed, or if you are looking to re-enter the workforce, know that there are laws, resources, and support available to support you. The following information guide will provide considerations for how to navigate the workplace with chronic pain.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR EMPLOYER

Disclosing about your chronic pain to your employer is a personal choice. When considering whether to disclose, the most important factor to consider is your ability to do the job. If your chronic pain or other disability would not impact your ability to do the job, then you do not need to disclose. However, if you need accommodations to do any of the job duties, you should consider disclosing. This is because, generally, employers only have the duty to accommodate disabilities that they know about. However, you decide what to share, when, and with whom. We will go into detail about considerations for disclosing to help you make an informed decision about what is right for you.

DISCLOSING TO YOUR EMPLOYER

A person may choose not to disclose about their chronic pain for the following reasons:

- Fear of discrimination or rejection
- Stigma, stereotypes, and being labelled
- Privacy concerns and personal boundaries
- Lack of trust in the workplace culture
- Your chronic pain condition does not affect your job
- Concerns about career advancement and accommodations
- Past negative experiences and cultural/ social factors

Conversely, a person may choose to disclose about their chronic pain for the following reasons:

- Receive accommodations
- Improve your chances of employment / keeping employment
- Explain gaps in employment
- Create an environment of education and understanding

If you decide to disclose about your chronic pain to your employer, consider the following:

- Present your strengths and interest in the job.
- Briefly describe your needs (diagnosis is not required). Keep it simple (personal details aren't always necessary) and avoid the use of medical terminology.
- Discuss the solutions (your requested accommodations).

It can be helpful to prepare a script and rehearse it, before disclosing. The following is a script template you may consider using:

- My valuable skills and abilities in relation to the job are...
- The restrictions and limitations that might affect my ability to do a particular duty are...
- The previous accommodations I have used successfully in the past are...
- The accommodations I might need are...

You may choose to disclose about your chronic pain at any time:

- On your resume / cover letter (particularly applicable if you are affiliated with a disability organization i.e., volunteering, on a board, part of a research study, etc.),
- During the interview (framing your disability as a strength to the position, if applicable i.e., "As someone with chronic pain..."),
- When you receive the job offer,

- Or on the job.

WHAT IS YOUR EMPLOYER ALLOWED TO ASK?

During an interview an employer may ask if you have any physical or mental disabilities that affect your ability to do the job. Questions must relate to your ability to perform the job duties (i.e., your ability to work night shifts, lift heavy items, or travel). Your employer does not have the right to ask for your diagnosis or treatment.

After accepting or during employment, your employer may ask questions about functional limitations caused by your disability as well as your prognosis (a doctor's opinion about how your disability will change over time). The medical information requested must focus on creating appropriate accommodations and must protect your privacy. Your employer is entitled to enough medical information to allow them to understand the nature and extent of your need for accommodation. While you do not need to disclose a specific diagnosis or treatment, you do need to provide medical information about any limitations or barriers you experience in your work.

Even if you do not disclose a disability or request accommodation, your employer may still have a duty to ask if you need accommodation. If an employer notices an employee is struggling at work, and there is reason to believe it could be connected to a disability, the employer has an obligation to talk to the employee about the potential existence of a disability and whether they need accommodation, before taking any disciplinary action against the employee.

If you are asked about your ability to do any of the duties of the job, either as part of a job interview or another conversation with your employer, you must respond honestly.

SHARING ABOUT CHRONIC PAIN

This may not be easy or appropriate in every work environment, but having a brief discussion on the complexity of pain (for instance, how pain impacts the biological, psychological, and social aspects of one's life) and what self-management strategies you find helpful (i.e., movement, pacing, mindfulness practices, etc.), may foster a more supportive work environment. Chronic pain is often an "invisible illness" which means it is often misunderstood, misinterpreted, or dismissed. By educating those around you about chronic pain, you can work to create a culture of understanding.

For more information about disclosing your disability, you may reference the following:

- Neil Squire Society, Disclosure of Disability: Who Needs to Know - [youtube.com/watch?v=26Q1Qa_3NxU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26Q1Qa_3NxU)
- Disability Alliance BC, Disclosing Your Disability: A Legal Guide for People with Disabilities - disabilityalliancebc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/DisclosureGuide.pdf

ACCOMMODATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Employers must provide reasonable workplace accommodations for individuals living with disabilities, including chronic pain. Accommodations may help you enter the workforce, return to, advance, stay, or improve your experience at work. Disability accommodations can either be temporary or permanent. Temporary accommodations are typically utilized for returning to work after an injury or illness and are intended to be a short-term solution. Whereas permanent disability accommodations are long-term and are intended to support an employee to continue to work despite their disability.

When initially speaking with your employer about disability-related accommodations, your employer will need to know the following:

- Whether you have a disability or medical condition that requires an accommodation (you do not have to share specific diagnosis or details about your treatment plan, unless there are significant safety concerns).
- What your physical or mental limitations relevant to their job are.
- What your accommodation needs are.

TYPES OF ACCOMMODATIONS FOR CHRONIC PAIN

Accommodations are best supported when you participate fully in both the identification of needs and, where possible, alternatives / solutions. A good place to start, is to learn about ways your employer can accommodate you and your pain condition. Some examples of workplace accommodations, related to chronic pain, you may consider exploring with your employer include:

- **Modified break schedule** (i.e., three 10-minute breaks instead of two 15-minute breaks or combining scheduled breaks to create one extended break).
- **Flexible hours** (i.e., adjusting starting and ending times of the workday and allowing work to be completed during hours when the employee is least fatigued or experiences less pain)

- Alternate work locations and / or telework.
- **Modification of the tasks** outlined in the employee's job description / performance requirements (i.e., limiting lifting, reaching, pushing, and pulling)
- **Modification of how tasks are completed** (i.e., reducing weight to be lifted by separating items into smaller groups or alternating between a physical and a mental task).
- Temporary or permanent reassignment.
- Taking a leave of absence:
 - EI Sick Benefits: canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/ei-sickness.html
 - Short-Term Illness and Injury Plan (STIIP) (applicable to BC government employees only): gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/all-employees/leave-time-off/sick-leave/stiip
 - Short-Term Disability (STD) (may be available to you under employee benefit plan): canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/services/insurance/disability.html#toc1
 - Long-Term Disability (LTD): gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/all-employees/leave-time-off/sick-leave/long-term-disability
- **Requesting an Ergonomic assessment** which is a process that evaluates an employee's work environment to ensure it is optimized for comfort, safety and efficacy. The assessment aims to identify and address physical discomfort or injury risks related to work setup, equipment, or work practices. Your supervisor will arrange an ergonomic assessment with a ministry trained ergonomic assessor. A ministry trained ergonomic assessor is an employee who has taken the Corporate Learning Branch's OHS Office Ergonomics Risk Assessment course often with an educational background in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or occupational health and safety. If you're at a smaller workplace and do not have a ministry train ergonomic assessor, your supervisor will find another ministry or local assessor.
- A pre-agreed plan with the employer for sudden pain flare-ups.
- Work Assistive Devices.

Some examples of ergonomic supports for chronic pain:

- Adjustable desks
- Ergonomic, adjustable office chairs
- Monitor stands
- Footrests
- Anti-fatigue matting

- Anti-vibration gloves
- Stand-lean stools
- Alternative mice and keyboards to reduce strain and improvement comfort

Some examples of technology devices for chronic pain:

- Dictation software
- Grammar and spell checkers
- Scribe / Notetaker
- Voice-activated controls

Access to workplace assistive devices may be available to you through a variety of means, and are dependent on your situation, such as your employer, union, WorkSafe BC, Work BC, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Canadian Pension Plan Disability, and non-profit organizations. You may consider referencing the resource section at the end of this manual for potential options to obtain workplace assistive devices.

To learn more about workplace accommodation options for chronic pain, visit -

askjan.org/disabilities/Chronic-Pain.cfm

To learn more about workplace ACED Toolkit options for chronic episodic conditions, visit -

aced.iwh.on.ca

MENTAL HEALTH ACCOMMODATIONS

Mental health and chronic pain are fundamentally connected. People living with chronic pain experience depression and anxiety at twice the rate of the general population. As a result, you may require workplace accommodations for your mental health.

To learn more about workplace accommodation options for mental health, visit -

askjan.org/disabilities/Mental-Health-Conditions.cfm.

For more information on mental health and chronic pain, visit - painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-10/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Pain%20-%20Final.pdf

For immediate mental health support, you may consider contacting the following:

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 9-8-8 or 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
- BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code)
- [KUU-US Crisis Response Service](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-800-588-8717
- [Hope For Wellness](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-855-242-3310

PREFERENCE VS. NEEDS

It is important to note that the employer has a duty to accommodate a worker's need(s), not the worker's preferences. Workers have a duty to cooperate with the employer throughout the accommodation process. Workers must consider an employer's accommodation offers in good faith. This means giving the offer a fair chance and only rejecting it if there is good reason. A worker is entitled to reasonable, not perfect, accommodation.

PROVIDING MEDICAL DOCUMENTATION

Ideally, workers and employers can agree on simple accommodation measures that meet a worker's needs without requiring formal documentation from a health care provider. However, in some cases of disability-related accommodation, the employer may require information from a health care provider. You do not need a formal diagnosis from your physician to receive disability accommodations, but you do need information from them about any restrictions or limitations affecting you. Employers should be flexible with their requirements regarding acceptable medical information (i.e., formal report, handwritten notes, physician versus other health care professionals, etc.).

After providing medical information, if the employer believes they lack sufficient or clear medical information, they may consider requesting an independent medical evaluation (IME). Your employer may also request an IME where there is contractual right to request in a collective agreement or within certain industries. To learn more about IME's visit, chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/resources/publications/workplace-accommodation-guide#step-2.

WHEN CAN YOUR EMPLOYER REFUSE TO ACCOMMODATE?

An employer is required to provide reasonable accommodation up to the point of undue hardship. The law weighs several factors to decide what counts as undue hardship:

- Whether the accommodation would create significant health and safety risks for the worker and others.
- Whether the financial cost of the accommodation is unaffordable, also considering the size of the employer and the resources available to them.
- Whether there are no opportunities to accommodate the worker (which can only be determined once the employer has made reasonable adaptations, but the employee is still unable to fulfill their basic employment obligations for the foreseeable future).

MAKING YOUR ACCOMMODATION PLAN WITH YOUR EMPLOYER

Unlike the return-to-work process, which is transitional and for a fixed duration, accommodation is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and review. The following should be part of your accommodation plan with your employer:

- Be in writing and signed by all parties.
- Note the specific accommodations that have been agreed to.
- Include training on the use of any work assistive devices.
- Indicate who you should approach with concerns or questions about your accommodation plan.
- Be flexible and subject to change based on your needs.
- Employers should address accommodation requests in a timely manner. Any delays by the employer should not impact an employee's ability to work and earn a wage.

Unionized employees may choose to involve their union representative in discussions pertaining to workplace accommodations. A union representative can offer advice or assistance regarding your request for accommodation. Contact your union directly, or your elected steward, to be connected with your representative for support.

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN IN THE WORKPLACE

There are also strategies you may consider using as an employee, that do not require employer accommodation, to manage your chronic pain at work. See the following for a list of examples:

- **Plan tasks strategically.** Chronic pain levels and symptoms, such as fatigue, can fluctuate throughout the day. For instance, you may have noticed patterns such as high pain in the mornings, compared to afternoon. Plan your workday accordingly, if possible, with high-priority

tasks for times when pain levels are typically low. Dividing large tasks into smaller tasks and spreading them out over time can also be beneficial.

- **Take intentional breaks.** Taking time throughout the workday to stretch, walk, engage in breathing exercises, and meditate can help reduce pain. You may consider setting a timer on your phone to remind you to take regular breaks from work.
- **Wear proper clothing.** For some people living with pain, the temperature can influence their pain symptoms. Dressing in layers, keeping a sweater on hand, and having a portable fan can support with regulating your temperature. In addition, individuals who stand or walk for a majority of the workday should wear supportive, comfortable shoes. A podiatrist can support with finding appropriate footwear.
- **Requesting specific support from your employer and colleagues.** For example, you may request that colleagues dispense information both verbally and in email to support with memory recall. See above section on disclosing your disability to determine if this strategy is right for you.
- **Keep tools for pain management at work.** You may have found tools to manage your pain, such as wearing sunglasses, using essential oils, wearing wrist or knee braces, heating pads, or ice packs, that can be brought to and used in the workplace while still maintaining productivity.
- **Keep medications at work.** If you take medication to manage your pain, ensure you have them available to you at your workplace in a secure location.
- **Continue using self-management strategies.** Maintaining good mental health, sleep hygiene, diet, exercise routine, and so on will support your pain levels and in turn improve your ability to work.

RETURNING TO WORK

If you go on a leave of absence from work or were injured at your workplace, you will develop a return-to-work agreement with your employer. A good return-to-work agreement should:

- Be developed in collaboration with you (the employee)
- Be in writing and signed by all parties.
- Specify the conditions the worker agrees to meet when returning to work.
- Include frequency and method of communication while you are on leave.
- Outline the expectations of both the employer and the worker.
- Define any temporary and/ or ongoing (permanent) accommodations.

As part of your return-to-work plan, you may need additional accommodations, beyond your chronic pain, to safely transition back to the position you were doing or to another suitable role. You may want to consider requesting the following as part of your return-to-work plan:

- A gradual return to work
- Additional training
- Support for your mental health

For individuals receiving support through **WorkSafeBC** or **Long-Term Disability**, you may receive **vocational rehabilitation**, which involves collaborating with a vocational rehabilitation consultant to develop a plan to help you return to your prior position or other suitable employment. Your vocational rehabilitation plan may include vocational counselling, an employment potential assessment, and assistance with employment-related inquiries such as job accommodations, employee rights, and insurance benefits. If you are with WorkSafeBC or Long-Term Disability and think you need help from a vocational rehabilitation consultant to return to work, contact your case manager to discuss a referral.

Unionized employees may choose to involve their union representative in discussions pertaining to returning to work. Contact your union directly, or your elected steward, to be connected with your staff representative for support.

DUTY TO ACCOMMODATE AND EMPLOYEE RIGHTS

DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Human rights laws protect people with disabilities from discrimination in the workplace. Discrimination in the workplace includes any action or decision that negatively impacts you because of your disability (or because of the employer's perception of your disability), such as:

- Failing to hire or promote someone
- Firing an employee
- Changing an employee's job in a way that reduces their salary, responsibilities, or status
- Failing to offer reasonable accommodation
- Assault or harassment by the employer, where that assault or harassment is related to the employee's disability

- Assault or harassment by anyone else in the workplace, such as other employees or customers, where that assault or harassment is related to the employee's disability

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE DENIED, OR FACE RETALIATION BECAUSE OF REQUESTING ACCOMMODATIONS

Unfortunately, despite best efforts to communicate with your employer, sometimes they do not understand or may still be unreasonable. As a result, it may be necessary to take legal action to enforce your right to reasonable accommodation which involves filing a complaint against the employer at a human rights tribunal:

- Most employers in BC are regulated by the provincial government, so human rights complaints must be filed with the **BC Human Rights Tribunal**: bchrt.bc.ca
- Some employers are regulated by the federal government, and in those cases human rights complaints must be filed with the **Canadian Human Rights Commission**: chrc-ccdp.gc.ca
- If you are in a union, you should speak to a union representative about the grievance, as soon as possible.

Complaining to a human rights tribunal can be stressful. If you are considering a human rights complaint, you may consider getting legal advice. The following affordable legal resources may be supportive:

- Disability Alliance, Disability Law Clinic: disabilityalliancebc.org/program/disability-law-clinic
- CLAS, BC Human Rights Clinic: bchrc.net
- Access Pro Bono, Lawyer Referral Service: gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/law-crime-and-justice/human-rights/human-rights-protection/disability.pdf

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE

If you are a person on Persons With Disabilities (PWD) assistance or Canadian Pension Plan Disability (CPP-D), you can still work and earn money. Money you earn, up to a certain amount, does not change the amount on your monthly payment, as long as you don't exceed the annual limit. This can be helpful for individuals who would like to return to work, or maintain a level of employment, but are not able to work full time due to their chronic pain.

For more information about earning income while on PWD and CPP-D, visit:

- Canada Pension Plan disability benefit tool kit: canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/pension-plan-disability-benefits/reports/toolkit.html#h5.2
- Disability Assistance, Annual Earnings Exemption: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/services-for-people-with-disabilities/disability-assistance/on-disability-assistance/annual-earnings-exemption

For information about income assistance options, visit:

- Pain BC, Income Supports for People Living with Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-07/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Income%20Supports%20-%20Final%20-%20Reviewed%20November%202024%20%281%29.pdf

RESOURCES / INFORMATION

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS / SUPPORTS

- Neil Squire, Creative Employment Options: neilsquire.ca/individual-programs-services/creative-employment-options
- Work BC Employment Services: workbc.ca/discover-employment-services
- Open Door Group: opendoorgroup.org/for-individuals/explore-employment-services-in-bc
- Reducing Poverty through Early Intervention and Occupational Rehabilitation Initiative: reducingpoverty.nidmar.ca
- Government of BC, Work-Able: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/job-seekers/internship-co-op-opportunities/work-able
- Government of BC, Self-Employment Program (SEP) for PPMB and PWD: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/eppe/self-employment-program-sep-for-ppmb-and-pwd
- Government of Canada, Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) Program: canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-skills-employment-training.html
- Government of Canada, Vocational Rehabilitation Program for Canada Pension Plan disability benefits recipients: canada.ca/en/services/benefits/publicpensions/cpp/cpp-disability-benefit/vocational-rehabilitation.html

- Metis Nation of BC, Skills Training, Employment & Post-Secondary (STEPS): mnbc.ca/STEPS
- BC Newcomers Services Program (BC NSP): [welcomebc.ca/start-your-life-in-b-c/find-newcomer-services/services-for-newcomers-on-a-temporary-work-or-study-permit-and-new-citizens%C2%A0\(bc-nsp\)](http://welcomebc.ca/start-your-life-in-b-c/find-newcomer-services/services-for-newcomers-on-a-temporary-work-or-study-permit-and-new-citizens%C2%A0(bc-nsp))
- BC Safe Haven: [welcomebc.ca/start-your-life-in-b-c/find-newcomer-services/services-for-refugee-claimants%C2%A0\(bc-safe-haven\)](http://welcomebc.ca/start-your-life-in-b-c/find-newcomer-services/services-for-refugee-claimants%C2%A0(bc-safe-haven))
- Career Paths for Skilled Immigrants: welcomebc.ca/start-your-life-in-b-c/career-paths-for-skilled-immigrants

OBTAINING WORKPLACE ASSISTIVE DEVICES

- Work BC, Assistive Technology Services: workbc-ats.ca
- CanAssist, WorkTech: canassist.ca/employment
- Tetra Society: tetrasociety.org
- Neil Squire, Solutions: neilsquire.ca/individual-programs-services/solutions
- Neil Squire, Computer Comfort: neilsquire.ca/individual-programs-services/computer-comfort
- Neil Squire, Makers Making Change: makersmakingchange.com

ENTREPRENEUR / SELF-EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

- Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Program: edpbusiness.ca
- Open Door Group, Self-Employment Service: opendoorgroup.org/for-individuals/explore-employment-services-in-bc

EDUCATION / TRAINING SUPPORTS

- StudentAid BC, Accessibility Programs and Services Resource Directory: studentaidbc.ca/sites/all/files/form-library/resource-directory-accessibility-programs-services.pdf
- Government of Canada, Severe and Permanent Disability Benefit: canada.ca/en/services/benefits/education/student-aid/grants-loans/repay/assistance/severe-disability.html
- Neil Squire, Distance Computer Comfort: neilsquire.ca/individual-programs-services/online-learning-2/distance-computer-comfort
- Metis Nation of BC, Skills Training, Employment & Post-Secondary (STEPS): mnbc.ca/STEPS

- Post-Secondary Student Support Program: bcaafc.com/education/psssp

SUPPORTS FOR CHRONIC PAIN

- Pain Support Line: Call or text 1-833-261-7246: painbc.ca/supportline
- Pain Support and Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/find-help/support-programs/making-sense-of-pain
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory
- Pain BC, Information Sheets: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/downloadables
- Live Plan Be+: liveplanbeplus.ca
- Power Over Pain Portal: portal.poweroverpain.ca
- Self-Management BC: selfmanagementbc.ca/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- WorkSafe BC: worksafebc.com
- BC Credit Counselling Society: nomoredebts.org/canada-credit-counselling/bc

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