



# Managing IBS at work

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a serious, long-term condition that can cause disability and disrupts the working lives of many. With around 10-20% of the UK population living with IBS, this represents a significant number who are affected in the workplace. It is estimated that Britain's businesses lose almost £3 billion every year through sick days related to gut health.<sup>1</sup>

**Do you manage someone with IBS and want to know how to help overcome related issues?**

**Are you an employee facing endless obstacles when trying to control your condition at work?**

 **ibsnetwork**  
helping you better...

# For Employers

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As an employer, you may be unaware of IBS and its debilitating effects on those who have the condition. Understanding ways in which you can help your staff who have IBS will allow them to continue working to their full capacity. Be aware that stress is often an important factor in those with IBS. If they feel unable to approach you, it might make their condition worse. Although you may find it a little uncomfortable at first, talk to your employee about what you can do to support them.

## Workplace changes to consider:

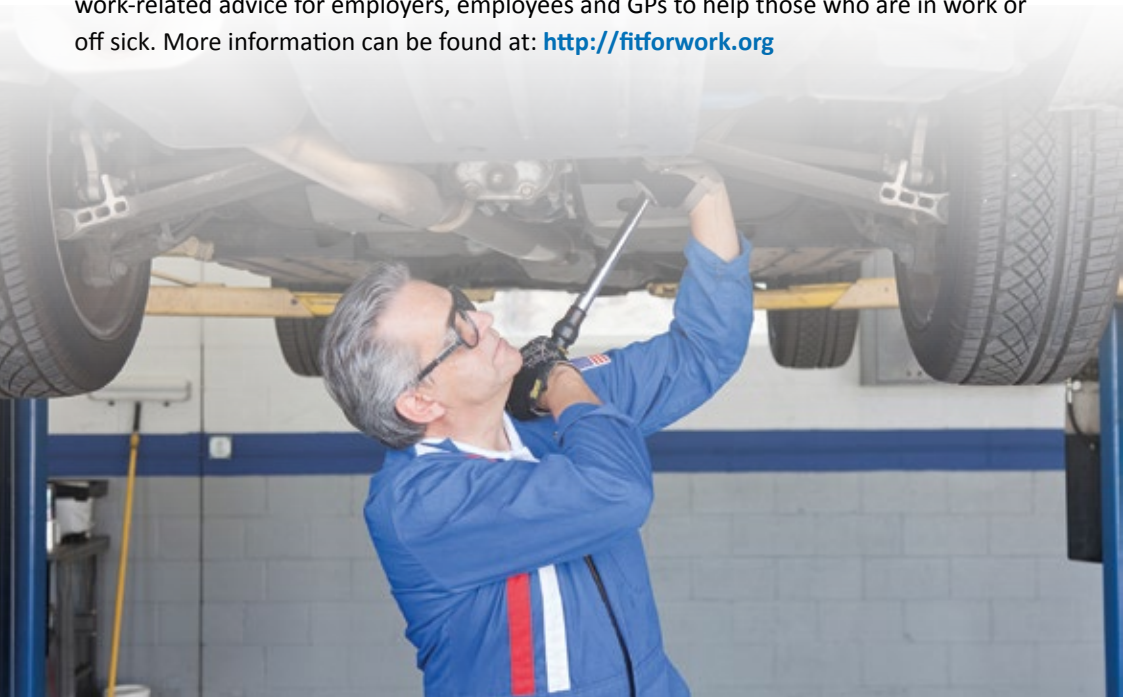
- offer flexible working
- provide easy access to toilets
- allow your employee to take regular work breaks
- ensure effective monitoring and management of workload.

## Equality Act 2010

If an employee's IBS impacts on their day-to-day abilities, it may be deemed to amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010. This means that, as an employer, you have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate them at work. You are obliged to obtain medical information from your employee if you are unsure on how to assist them by making the necessary adjustments to the workplace.

## Fit for Work

The Government-funded initiative, Fit for Work, provides a free support service and work-related advice for employers, employees and GPs to help those who are in work or off sick. More information can be found at: <http://fitforwork.org>



# For Employees

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If you work and are living with IBS, you may have needed to take time off when your symptoms have been particularly severe. Travelling to and from work and to meetings can be very challenging too. We understand that you may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or humiliated when explaining your condition to your line manager or colleagues, but it may help alleviate some of your anxiety if you explain your condition with a trusted manager. **They cannot support you if they do not know.**

## Ways to improve your work life:

### Self-management of IBS symptoms

Everyone's IBS symptoms and triggers are unique to them. The IBS Network has created a fully comprehensive IBS Self-Care Programme to help manage your IBS, at:

[www.theibsnetwork.org/the-self-care-plan](http://www.theibsnetwork.org/the-self-care-plan)

### Managing stress and anxiety

It might be embarrassing but try not to keep your IBS a secret. Consider informing your manager about your condition and highlighting the effect that additional stress can have on your symptoms. If necessary, ask your GP for a letter explaining your illness and how it impacts on your working life.

### Diet and eating at work

The IBS Network website has extensive information on diet, recipes and food related topics to help people manage their IBS: <https://www.theibsnetwork.org/diet>

You could also try the following:

- get up early enough to allow plenty of time for breakfast and to go to the toilet before work
- take a proper lunch break and avoid eating meals on the run
- prepare your own food so you know what it contains and the portion sizes
- don't skip meals to avoid having to go to the toilet
- to avoid dehydration and constipation, aim to drink at least eight cups of fluid per day, especially water or other non-caffeinated drinks.

### Treatment

You can learn to manage your IBS symptoms through diet, stress management and medicines. However, there is no single cure or single drug to treat IBS.

### Be prepared

Keep a supply of your IBS medication within easy reach, along with some wipes and anything else you might need during an attack. Consider purchasing an IBS Emergency Kit to keep discreetly in your bag or at work.

# Frequently Asked Questions

At The IBS Network we frequently receive calls from people who have IBS or manage people who are experiencing difficulties at work. A selection of questions are provided here and more can be found on our website.

## Q. Do I need to tell my employer that I have IBS?

**A.** This depends on whether you are able to self-manage your symptoms or need additional support. IBS symptoms can vary from person-to-person and the condition's impact can amount to a disability. Employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace. However, they can only do this if they are aware of your condition and specific symptoms.

## Q. I employ someone who has IBS - could you explain if the condition is classed as a disability? If so, am I obliged to make special allowances for them?

**A.** If your employee's IBS impacts on their daily abilities, it may be deemed to amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010. This means that as an employer you have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate them at work. By talking

to your employee and understanding their symptoms you should accommodate any reasonable adjustments to avoid discriminating against them.

## Q. I have been invited to a disciplinary meeting because of a reason connected to my IBS. Is there anything I can do?

**A.** Your employer has the right to investigate any issue or conduct that they reasonably believe has occurred. If the matter relates to your IBS, eg taking more toilet breaks than your colleagues, it is important that you explain this to your employer. If they act unreasonably in disciplining or possibly even dismissing you, you may have a claim for unfair dismissal and disability discrimination and specialist legal advice should be sought. By making your employer aware of any health concerns early in the working relationship you could avoid unnecessary or unfair disciplinary action. Your employer is obliged to obtain medical information if they are unsure on how to assist you by making adjustments.

## Get in touch for more information:

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The IBS Network is a registered charity in England and Wales. Charity number: 1057563

<sup>1</sup> Gut Week press release: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from One Poll. Total sample size was 2,000 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken on 14th July 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).