

Long-term conditions people may not disclose at work

Lots of people live with long-term health conditions. These might be things you can see, like joint pain or mobility problems. But often, they're invisible, like migraine, endometriosis or hearing loss.

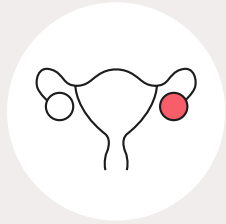
At work, it can feel hard to talk about these issues. Some people are **worried they'll be treated differently**. Others may **fear their manager won't understand**. For many, it just feels too personal.

Even though equality laws are there to protect employees, **people can still feel uncomfortable being open**. They may worry they'll be judged, or that their symptoms won't be taken seriously. That is especially true when the condition flares up without warning or affects performance.

Some choose not to say anything because **they don't need extra support**. Others stay quiet because they haven't had a diagnosis yet. **But when a condition affects your day-to-day job, speaking up could make things easier.**

Common conditions that often go unspoken

Some long-term conditions are more likely to be hidden, especially when symptoms vary day to day. Here are a few examples:



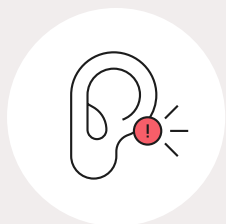
Endometriosis

This condition affects around **1 in 10 women** and **people assigned female at birth**. It happens when tissue like the lining of the womb grows elsewhere in the body, often around the pelvis. It can cause severe pain, fatigue and heavy bleeding. Many people suffer for years before getting a diagnosis. At work, flare-ups can make it hard to sit for long, concentrate or manage meetings.



Migraine

Migraine affects more than 1 in 7 people. It's a neurological condition that can cause throbbing pain, sickness, light sensitivity and even temporary vision loss. **Triggers vary**, and **episodes may happen a few times a month or more**. Because symptoms are invisible and misunderstood, people often don't disclose them at work.



Hearing loss

About 1 in 5 adults have hearing loss. Some people are born with it. Others develop it later. It can range from mild to severe and might not be noticeable in quiet or one-to-one settings. Without support, **hearing loss can lead to isolation, missed information** and **stress**, especially in meetings or video calls. Many people manage on their own to avoid embarrassment or stigma.



Neurodiversity

An estimated **15 to 20 percent of people are neurodivergent**. This includes conditions like **autism, ADHD** and **dyslexia**. While these are not illnesses, they can affect how someone experiences work. Many people worry about stigma or being misunderstood, so choose not to tell their employer.



Depression

Depression affects around 1 in 6 adults. It's a common mental health condition that impacts mood, sleep, energy and concentration. Some people find it hard to talk about because of fear of judgement or not being taken seriously.

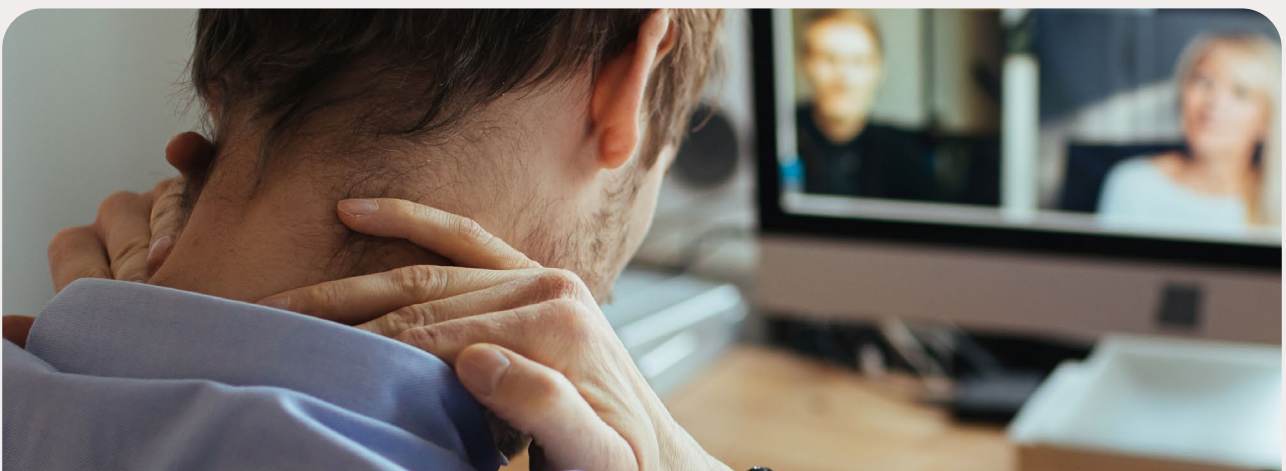


Chronic pain conditions (like fibromyalgia)

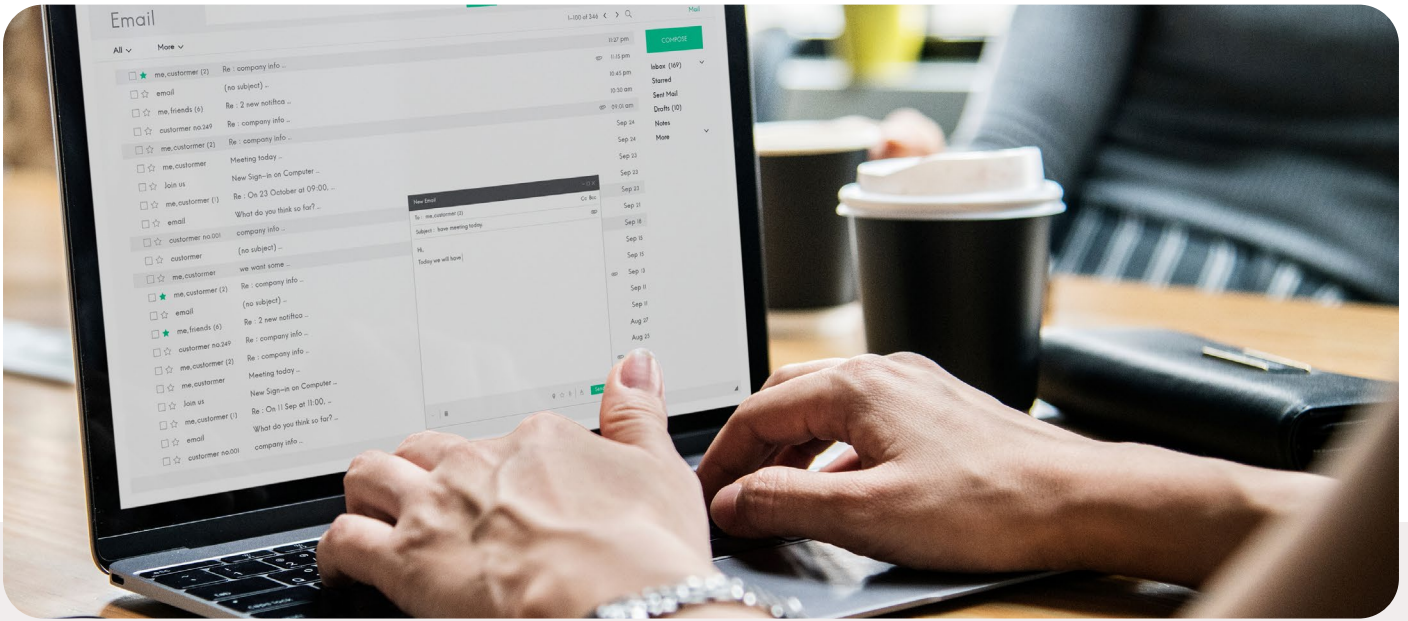
Fibromyalgia is thought to affect about 1 in 20 people. It causes widespread pain and fatigue, with no clear cause. While the exact reason isn't fully understood, the leading theory is that **it involves abnormal brain chemistry** and how the central nervous system processes pain signals. This means people with fibromyalgia may feel pain more strongly than others, even without obvious physical injury.

Other conditions that may be kept private include:

- **Epilepsy** (affects around 1 in 100 people)
- **Long COVID** (estimated to affect 1.9 million people)
- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)** (affects up to 1 in 10 people)
- **Autoimmune conditions** (like lupus or rheumatoid arthritis)
- **Diabetes** (more than 5 million people live with it)
- **Arthritis** (affects over 10 million people)
- **Mental health diagnoses**



Just because you can't see a condition doesn't mean it isn't real. Many people find ways to cope quietly, but that doesn't mean they don't need understanding.



Why people with invisible illnesses may keep them hidden from employers

It's not always easy to explain a condition that can't be seen. Many people with invisible illnesses, like chronic fatigue, endometriosis, anxiety or diabetes, worry they won't be believed, understood or taken seriously.

One survey found that **nearly two-thirds of workers** wouldn't feel comfortable telling their employer if they were **neurodivergent**. Another found that **more than 1 in 4 employees have a long-term health condition** they've never disclosed.

They may look fine on the outside but still deal with pain, exhaustion or flare-ups that disrupt their routine. Because of this, some fear being labelled as unreliable or difficult.

Others have had poor experiences in the past, being dismissed, questioned or treated differently after sharing their diagnosis. This can make them cautious about opening up again.

The idea of having to justify symptoms or prove their condition is real can also be stressful. **Some people prefer to keep things private** rather than risk judgement or awkward conversations.

In some cases, employees don't want to be seen as asking for **"special treatment"**. So instead of requesting simple changes that could help, like a quiet workspace, time off for appointments or flexibility during flare-ups, they try to manage alone.

This silence doesn't mean they're coping well. Often, it means they don't feel safe enough to be honest. A workplace culture that supports openness, privacy and fairness can help break this pattern.

Why workplace culture makes a difference

Whether someone chooses to talk about a long-term condition at work often **depends on the environment they're in**. If the culture feels open and supportive, they're more likely to speak up. If it feels judgmental or unkind, they may stay silent, even if they need help.

Not speaking up can have knock-on effects. Someone might keep pushing through pain or exhaustion. They might avoid asking for simple adjustments that would make their day easier. Over time, this can lead to burnout, worsening symptoms or feeling excluded.

On the flip side, **when workplaces normalise health conversations, people feel safer.** A good culture helps colleagues ask for what they need without fear of being seen as weak, dramatic or unreliable.

Managers set the tone, but it's a team effort. If people feel supported rather than singled out, they're more likely to thrive, stay in their role and perform well. Making space for health doesn't mean lowering standards. It just means treating people with respect.



Signs someone might be struggling silently

Not everyone will feel comfortable sharing a diagnosis or asking for support. But you might still **notice small clues that a colleague isn't feeling their best.**

These could include:

- Taking more sick days than usual
- Often arriving late or leaving early
- Appearing tired, distracted or withdrawn
- Struggling to keep up with tasks or deadlines
- Avoiding social events or meetings
- Saying vague things like “just a bit off” or “not feeling great lately”



These signs don't always mean someone has a health condition. But if they happen often, **it could be worth checking in.**

A simple “*How are you doing at the moment?*” can go a long way. **You don't need to ask personal questions** or expect someone to open up. Just showing kindness and patience makes it easier for someone to speak when they're ready.

Your rights at work if you have a long-term condition

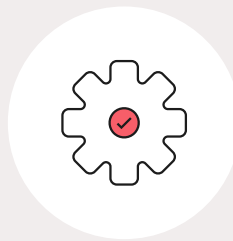
If you live with a health condition that affects your day-to-day life, **you may be protected by law**, even if you haven't shared it at work. A condition is usually considered long-term if it lasts, or is expected to last, **12 months or more**. It can be physical, mental, or fluctuate over time.

In many countries, long-term health issues can fall under disability protections, **depending on how much they affect you**. You don't have to tell your employer about your condition unless you want to ask for support or adjustments. But if you do, **they are legally required to treat this information sensitively**.



This means your employer:

- Can't treat you unfairly because of your condition
- Must consider reasonable changes to help you do your job
- Should keep health information private if you choose to share it



These "reasonable adjustments" might include:

- Flexible start or finish times
- Time off for medical appointments
- Working from home during flare-ups
- A quieter workspace or better chair
- Changing the way tasks are done or assessed

Reasonable adjustments are based on your needs and the nature of your job. It's usually a **two-way conversation with your manager or HR** to find what works best for both you and the business. You don't need to give every detail to ask for support. A simple note from your GP or specialist can explain what changes might help.

You could say something like:

"I have a health condition that sometimes affects me at work. I'd like to talk about what support might help me manage it better."

If you feel you're being treated unfairly or your requests are being ignored, **you can raise a concern with HR**. In some cases, advice from a union, legal support service or workplace advocacy group may also help.



What employers and colleagues can do to help

You don't need to know someone's diagnosis to help create a supportive workplace. Small changes in culture and communication can make a big difference.

For employers and managers:

- Make it clear that **health conversations are welcome** and **confidential**
- Offer training on **disability awareness** and **hidden conditions**
- Have clear policies on **reasonable adjustments** and how to request them
- Encourage **flexible ways of working** where possible
- **Lead by example** by being open about taking care of your own health

For colleagues:

- **Don't make assumptions** about what someone can or can't do
- **Respect people's privacy.** If they share something, keep it confidential
- **Be patient if someone needs time off,** changes how they work or has to step back during a flare-up
- **Check in with kindness,** not pressure. A simple *"Anything I can do to support you?"* goes a long way

Creating a culture of trust doesn't happen overnight. But when people feel safe, included and understood, everyone benefits.

Contact **HealthHero** today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.