



## What is a disability?



A disability is typically defined as a health condition or problem that has a degree of permanence and impairs one's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. A disability is created when this impairment comes up against a disabling environment. A disability is also shaped by physical, institutional and social barriers, including attitudes and assumptions about differences and impairments.

Disabilities can be temporary, permanent or chronic.

Every disability is unique to the individual experiencing it. Roughly 4.4 million Canadians have some sort of disability.

People with disabilities who are also marginalized by class, racism, gender homophobia or transphobia face additional barriers.

Some are born with a disabling condition, like spina bifida. Others acquire a disability, like diabetes, over the course of their lifetime. Still others become disabled as a result of an accident. Many Canadians experience disabling conditions like hearing impairment or cardio-vascular issues as they age.

There is a long list of conditions affecting a worker's ability to work that can be considered a disability.

Disabilities include, but are not limited to:

- Cancers
- Chronic conditions like HIV and AIDS
- Depression
- Dyslexia
- Chemical and environmental sensitivities
- Carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis
- Fibromyalgia
- Amputations
- Paralysis
- Degenerative disc disease
- Migraines or severe headaches
- Lou Gehrig's disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Epilepsy

You have the right to have a disability accommodated at work.

Check out the fact sheet:  
**What is the duty to accommodate?**

[cupe.ca/disability-rights](http://cupe.ca/disability-rights)

## Invisible and perceived disabilities

The challenges imposed by disabilities are not always visible.

Many people picture wheelchairs, guide dogs, and other more obvious signs of disability. But not all workers with mobility issues require a wheelchair, and not all visually impaired workers are completely blind.

Some people with a disability might appear perfectly healthy. It's important to avoid making assumptions about a person's health status or disability.

How we perceive disabilities can create barriers for workers.

Alternately, sometimes workers are discriminated against because an employer or co-worker perceives them to be disabled when they are not.

Consider a worker returning to work following a heart attack with full medical clearance who has been told by her employer that she cannot perform certain tasks. This worker is being discriminated against because she is not allowed to perform her job. This discrimination is the result of a perceived disability, not based on fact.

Sometimes disabilities can be triggered in the workplace. People with occupational asthma, for instance, may be completely free of symptoms as long as they work in an area with no irritants.

## Physical disabilities

### Mobility

Limited mobility, limited agility, and pain are the physical conditions most common to workers with disabilities. Thirty to forty per cent of workers with a disability cope with some variation of this trio.

### Seeing and hearing

Every 12 minutes someone in Canada begins to lose their eyesight, according to CNIB, an organization representing Canadians who are blind or partially sighted. Despite the fact that on average Canadians with vision loss attain a higher educational level than other Canadians, they face higher unemployment and underemployment rates than Canadians with disabilities in general.

An estimated 350,000 Canadians are deaf. Three and a half million Canadians have some degree of hearing loss. Less than half of working age people with a hearing disability are employed.

Vision and hearing challenges will become increasingly common as our population ages.

## Mental disabilities

Mental disabilities can take many forms, and the symptoms may not be obvious to employers and co-workers.

One in five adult Canadians will suffer a mental disorder in their lives. Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common.

Stress and anxiety are often part of life and the workplace. In many cases, they are caused by poor working conditions, steadily worsened by privatization. (See CUPE's summary of research on mental injuries.)

Stress can be associated with severe physical and psychological effects, including sleep disorders, fatigue, depression, susceptibility to injury, and a compromised immune system.

Recognizing toxic levels of stress as a health and safety issue is vital to preventing some disabling conditions.

Other mental disabilities include, but are not limited to:

- Bipolar disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Dyslexia
- Memory problems
- Schizophrenia
- Autism
- Phobias

## Addiction

Addiction is considered a disease and a disability.

There is a medical difference between misuse and addiction. Substance abuse is not grounds for accommodation. Substance addiction, proven by medical evidence, can be accommodated in the workplace.

## Episodic disabilities

An episodic disability is experienced when a person goes through periods of ill health when they require accommodation or are unable to work. Often the accommodation required for episodic disabilities is tolerance for both absenteeism and the inability to predict such absences.

Advances in medicine have made it possible for people with chronic conditions like lupus or HIV and AIDS to live full lives with little medical intervention. But sometimes chronic conditions flare up. The cause may be unknown or even result from stresses in the workplace.

Many cancer treatments are less debilitating than in the past and many people return to work quickly. However, treatments often take a physical, emotional and financial toll that must be considered. They can trigger other disabling conditions such as depression and anxiety.

Regardless of the cause, people suffering from episodic disabilities are entitled to protection from workplace discrimination just as those with other forms of disabilities.

## Temporary Disabilities

Although a disability is usually a condition with a degree of permanence, there are cases where temporary conditions have been considered disabilities.

Some examples of temporary conditions are:

- Heart attack
- Hysterectomy
- Broken bones, sprains and joint injuries
- Intermittent back pain
- Appendicitis

Temporary disabilities are not the same as episodic disabilities. A temporary disability eventually ends, while episodic disabilities may reoccur indefinitely.

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Showing our mettle



For more information  
[cupe.ca/disability-rights](http://cupe.ca/disability-rights)