
REASONABLE WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PERSONS WITH CHRONIC PAIN

WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN?

While acute pain is a normal sensation triggered in the nervous system to alert you to possible injury and the need to take care of yourself, chronic pain is different. Chronic pain persists. Pain signals keep firing in the nervous system for weeks, months, even years (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, n.d.).

In the workplace, chronic pain can impact productivity, attendance, and wellbeing. With appropriate accommodations, however, employees can remain engaged, manage their health, and contribute fully.

1. PHYSICAL WORKSPACE & EQUIPMENT:

- **Ergonomic adjustments:** Provide ergonomic chairs, adjustable desks (sit-stand), footrests, and alternative keyboards.
- **Assistive devices:** Grip aids, hearing aids, voice-to-text software, and wearable anti-fatigue mats. These tools help employees perform tasks more comfortably, reduce strain on the body, and support those managing chronic pain or physical limitations.
- **Accessibility improvements:** Easy-grip handles, automatic doors, and moving a workstation to a more accessible area.

2. WORK SCHEDULE & TASKS:

- **Flexible hours:** Offering flexible work schedules, compressed workweeks, or remote work options.
 - **Frequent breaks:** Allow additional or more frequent breaks for stretching or pain management.
 - **Task modification:** Reassigning tasks, reducing the weight of lifted items, or rotating tasks to prevent fatigue.
 - **Self-paced workload:** Allow employees to work at a pace that accommodates fatigue and discomfort.
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3. WORK POLICIES & PROCEDURES:

- **Stress reduction:** Limiting workplace stress by setting manageable workloads and schedules.
- **Sick leave management:** Developing plans for paid sick days and return-to-work after flare-ups.
- **Communication tools:** Providing telephone headsets or speaker phones to reduce physical strain from holding a phone.
- **Counselling & support:** Allow telephone calls to medical professionals, provide information on counselling, employee assistance programs, and community services.

4. DAILY LIVING & WORKPLACE ACCESSIBILITY

- **Assistance:** Allow use of a personal assistance or service animal at work.
- **Workplace Essentials:** Provide access to refrigerators, water, and other essentials.
- **Workplace Accessibility:** Ensure the office is accessible by providing automatic doors, accessible pathways, parking close to workstations.

5. SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- **Depression & Anxiety:** Provide sensitivity training, allow time for medical appointments, and develop proactive coping strategies.
- **Fatigue & Weakness:** Reduce physical exertion, provide accessible parking, and schedule rest breaks away from the workstation.
- **Muscle Pain & Stiffness:** Use ergonomic workstations with sit/stand options, rotate repetitive tasks, control workplace temperature, and allow remote work during extreme weather.

Reasonable workplace accommodations for employees with chronic pain foster inclusion, dignity, and long-term productivity. By adjusting work environments, schedules, and support systems, employers can reduce absenteeism, increase engagement, and comply with South Africa's Employment Equity Act. Creating a culture of understanding and flexibility benefits both employees and organisations.

The NCPD offers various workplace services, including: Recruitment & Placement, Reasonable Accommodation, Workplace Policies, Disclosure Support, Assistive Devices, Womens Programmes, and Enterprise Development.

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