

Succeeding at Work When You Have IBD

A Young Adult's Guide to Starting a Job, Managing Your Health and Finding Your Footing

Part of the **IBD In Real Life series.**

Your career is just beginning. IBD is coming along for the ride.

Practical ways to navigate your first job, communicate your needs, plan for the unexpected and build confidence at work.

This guide provides general educational information and is not a substitute for medical advice. Work with your healthcare team to develop a plan appropriate for your condition and individual needs.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR CONTINENCE



A New Job. A New Routine. A Few Extra Considerations.

Starting your career is a big step. Managing IBD is part of figuring it out.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR CONTINENCE

Your first job or internship comes with plenty of new experiences. New coworkers. New responsibilities. New expectations. And probably a few things you didn't anticipate.

When you're living with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), including Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, there's another layer to consider.

Will you have easy access to a bathroom? What if you're having a flare on an important workday? How will you schedule medical appointments? What should you tell your manager, if anything?

These are real concerns, especially when you're trying to make a good impression and prove yourself.

But here's something worth remembering: **Being a good employee doesn't mean pretending your health doesn't matter.**

Learning how to manage your condition alongside your work responsibilities is part of building a professional life that works for you.

Start by thinking ahead.

Before your first day, or early in a new position, consider a few practical questions:

- Where are the bathrooms, and can you access them quickly?
- How long is your commute, and are there convenient stops along the way?
- Will your work schedule affect medication timing or medical appointments?
- Does your job involve long meetings, travel, physical activity or shifts with limited breaks?
- Who can you contact if symptoms interfere with your ability to work?

You don't need to have every answer before you start. But knowing what questions to ask can make the transition easier.



Your goal isn't to eliminate every uncertainty. It's to be better prepared when things don't go as planned.

GETTING THROUGH THE WORKDAY

Sometimes the little things make the biggest difference.



A workday can be unpredictable, even when you're feeling well. Meetings run long. Lunch gets delayed. Your commute takes longer than expected. With IBD, those everyday disruptions can create additional challenges. The good news is that some advance planning can help you feel more comfortable and prepared.

The commute

Whether you're driving, taking public transportation or walking to work, think about how you'll manage a day when symptoms are more active.

- Identify bathrooms along your route
- Allow extra travel time when possible
- Have a backup transportation plan just in case

Meals and medications

New schedules can disrupt familiar routines. You may be eating at different times, commuting during your usual medication schedule or working through lunch.

- Think about how you'll manage meals, medications, refills and any treatment-related needs during the workday
- Since food tolerance varies from person to person, work with your healthcare team to develop an approach that meets your needs



Bathroom access

For someone with IBD, knowing where the nearest bathroom is can make a significant difference in how comfortable they feel at work.

- Learn the layout of your workplace, including bathrooms near your workstation, meeting rooms and other areas where you spend time
- If your job makes it difficult to take breaks when needed, consider discussing possible arrangements with an appropriate workplace contact

Fatigue is real, too.

IBD isn't just about digestive symptoms. Fatigue can make it difficult to concentrate, stay productive or maintain your usual energy throughout the day.

- Talk with your healthcare team about what you're experiencing if fatigue is affecting your ability to work
- Look at whether workplace adjustments could help you better manage your energy levels

Planning ahead doesn't mean expecting the worst. It means giving yourself more options.

WHAT SHOULD YOU TELL YOUR EMPLOYER?

Your health is personal. You get to decide how to talk about it.



One of the biggest questions young people with IBD face when starting a job is whether to tell their employer about their condition. There's no single answer that's right for everyone. Some people prefer to be open about their IBD, while others would rather keep their diagnosis private unless there's a specific reason to discuss it.

You don't necessarily need to share your diagnosis with coworkers or explain every symptom to your manager. However, if you need formal workplace accommodations, you may need to provide relevant medical information through your employer's established process. The important thing is understanding what support you need and who needs to know.

A few ways to start the conversation

If you want to keep things general:

"I have a chronic medical condition that I manage, but occasionally it can affect my schedule or require some flexibility."

If you need frequent bathroom access:

"I have a medical condition that sometimes requires me to use the bathroom urgently. I'd like to discuss how I can manage that while meeting my work responsibilities."

If you have recurring appointments:

"I have ongoing medical appointments that I need to schedule periodically. Could we discuss how best to plan around them?"

If you'd prefer not to share details:

"I'd prefer to keep that personal, but I'm happy to discuss any practical arrangements that may be necessary."

Who should you talk to?

Depending on your workplace, your manager, human resources department or another designated contact may be the appropriate person to approach.

If you're requesting formal accommodations, ask about the company's process and any documentation that may be required. And when it comes to interactions with your coworkers, you can keep those conversations separate from formal accommodation requests.

You can be professional, responsible and honest about your needs without making IBD the center of your workplace identity.

WHEN YOU NEED A LITTLE FLEXIBILITY

Asking for support is not the same as asking for special treatment.



IBD symptoms can change, sometimes without much warning. You might feel fine when you leave home but struggle with urgency or abdominal pain during a meeting. Or you may have a treatment appointment that conflicts with your schedule. Depending on your job, your medical needs and applicable laws, workplace accommodations may be available to help you perform your work.

In the United States, inflammatory bowel disease may qualify as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Eligibility and available protections depend on your circumstances and the law.

What might workplace accommodations look like?

Depending on your situation and the requirements of your job, possible accommodations might include:

- Ready access to bathroom breaks
- A workstation located closer to a bathroom
- Flexibility for medically necessary appointments
- Adjustments to break schedules
- Modified work hours or remote work when appropriate and feasible
- Temporary adjustments during symptom flares

Not every accommodation is possible in every job. Your employer can help you understand the process for requesting support and evaluating appropriate options.

How to ask

You don't have to arrive with a perfect solution. You can start by explaining the challenge and asking to explore options.

If you need more bathroom flexibility:

"My medical condition sometimes requires urgent bathroom access. Could we discuss how to accommodate that during my shifts?"

If treatment conflicts with your schedule:

"I have a recurring medical appointment that may occasionally affect my availability. I'd like to work out a schedule that allows me to meet my responsibilities."

If you need temporary flexibility:

"I'm experiencing a change in my medical condition and may need a temporary adjustment. Could we discuss what options might be available?"

The goal is to work toward an arrangement that supports your health while allowing you to contribute effectively at work.

You don't have to wait until you're overwhelmed to learn what support may be available.

WHEN IBD INTERRUPTS YOUR PLANS



Some days don't go according to schedule. That doesn't mean you're failing.

You wake up with abdominal pain on the morning of an important meeting. Your symptoms worsen during a shift. You're exhausted after a difficult night. When you're new to a job, these situations can feel especially stressful. You may worry that your manager will think you're unreliable, that coworkers will have to cover for you or that you're making a bad impression.

But IBD is a chronic condition, and symptoms aren't always predictable. What's important is having a plan for communicating and responding when your health affects your work.

When you need to change plans

If you're unable to come to work:

"I'm dealing with a medical issue today and won't be able to come in. I'll follow our usual absence procedures and keep you updated as appropriate."

If you need to step away unexpectedly:

"I'm not feeling well and need to take a short break. I'll let you know if I need additional time."

If you're concerned about a deadline:

"I'm managing a medical issue that's affecting my availability. Could we discuss the project timeline and any adjustments that might be possible?"

If you need to leave early:

"My symptoms have worsened, and I need to head home. Can we discuss how to handle my remaining responsibilities today?"

Being dependable doesn't mean never needing help. It means communicating and planning as responsibly as you can.

Build a backup plan.

Think about what would make a difficult workday more manageable. Who should you contact if you can't come in? How much notice can you reasonably provide? Are there tasks that can be handled remotely, rescheduled or reassigned when necessary?

It can also help to know your workplace's policies for absences, sick time and requesting accommodations.

And remember that your healthcare team is an important part of your plan. If symptoms are worsening, becoming more frequent or interfering with your ability to work, contact your provider rather than simply trying to push through.



TAKING CARE OF YOUR HEALTH WHILE BUILDING YOUR CAREER

Your job is important. So is your long-term health.



Starting work often means taking more responsibility for your own schedule, finances, insurance and medical care. If you're living with IBD, that can involve a lot of moving pieces.

Medications. Refills. Appointments. Lab tests. Insurance questions. And knowing what to do if symptoms change. It's understandable if managing all of this feels like another job sometimes.

Create a routine that works for you.

Keep track of appointments. Add medical visits, lab work and treatments to your calendar, and plan ahead for scheduling conflicts.

Stay organized with medications. Know when refills are due, which pharmacy to contact and what to do if there's a delay or problem.

Understand your health coverage. If you're transitioning to new insurance, find out how your providers, prescriptions and treatments are covered. Ask for help if you're unsure.

Pay attention to changes. Keep track of symptoms, fatigue or other issues that may be affecting your work or daily life.

Know who to call. Have your healthcare team's contact information available and understand when to seek medical advice.



Be honest with your healthcare team.

It's tempting to downplay symptoms when you're busy or don't want your health to interfere with your career. But your provider needs to know how IBD is affecting your everyday life.

Instead of saying, "I've been tired lately," you might say: "I've been feeling exhausted most afternoons, and it's becoming difficult to concentrate and keep up with my work."

Instead of saying, "My stomach has been acting up," try: "I've had more frequent diarrhea and urgency over the past week, and I've had to leave meetings unexpectedly."

The more specific you can be, the easier it is for your healthcare team to understand what's happening and help you develop an appropriate plan.

Contact your healthcare team about worsening symptoms, new or increasing bleeding, persistent fatigue, treatment difficulties or symptoms that interfere with daily activities. Seek urgent medical attention for severe abdominal pain, significant bleeding, fainting or signs of serious dehydration.

Taking your health seriously is part of taking your future seriously.

YOUR CAREER. YOUR HEALTH. YOUR WAY.

You don't have to figure everything out on your first day.







Starting a career is a learning experience for everyone. You'll discover what you're good at, what challenges you, how you work best and what kind of support helps you succeed. Living with IBD adds another dimension to that process.

There may be days when everything goes smoothly and days when you need to make adjustments. You may become more comfortable talking about your condition over time, or you may prefer to keep those conversations limited and private.

Either way, you can continue building a professional life that reflects your interests, abilities and goals.

Five things to remember

1. A little planning can go a long way.

Learn your workplace routines, think through potential challenges and have a backup plan when possible.

2. You have a right to privacy.

You don't need to discuss your condition with everyone. Learn what information may be needed when requesting formal support.

3. It's okay to ask for accommodations.

Workplace support may be available depending on your needs, your job and applicable laws.

4. Don't ignore changes in your health.

If symptoms are worsening or affecting your work, contact your healthcare team.

5. Your condition doesn't define your potential.

IBD is something you manage. It isn't the only thing you bring to your job, your relationships or your future.

A conversation starter you can make your own:

"I have _____, which sometimes affects my ability to _____. When that happens, it would help if _____. I'd like to discuss how we can make that work while meeting my responsibilities."

You can adapt this for a manager, HR representative or another appropriate workplace contact.

Your first job is the beginning of your professional story. And while IBD may be part of your life, it doesn't have to be the whole story.

More resources from NAFC

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