

# Gympass

A practical guide to help your workforce cope with chronic diseases



# Summary

Just as with anxiety, burnout or depression, companies need to be mindful of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure as. Understanding these diseases is essential to improving the health of your workforce and your long term battle in maintaining an effective culture.

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# 1

## Caring for the health of your workforce

Dealing with temporary health problems or injuries is part of everyone's lives; it doesn't usually take long before life goes back to normal. But the same does not apply for those who suffer from hypertension, high cholesterol, or diabetes; the most common chronic diseases. Once diagnosed, they must learn how to live with their condition for life. Although modern medicine can help make these conditions more manageable, they can still significantly affect people both emotionally and physically.

By now, you already know that the health of your employees is an essential component for any successful company. Providing your employees with the tools to manage and improve their mental and physical health not only shows that they matter but is also considered a key element in any successful business strategy. The health of your workforce affects several aspects of an organisation, from productivity to synergy within the workplace culture. Research has shown that healthy people are not just happier but more productive and less prone to accidents on the job as well.

With this guide, we aim to provide you with a practical map to implement measures to effectively deal with chronic diseases and improve the overall wellbeing of your employees.



# 2

## What are chronic diseases and how do they affect your employees

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), also known as chronic conditions, are long-lasting illnesses that are rarely ever cured completely. This type of condition develops slowly and can happen at any period of our lives, from birth to elderly age. Once diagnosed, most chronic conditions become a permanent feature of an individual's life.

### CHRONIC CONDITIONS NUMBERS

**80%**

of adults over 65 years old have at least one chronic condition

**67%**

of older adults have two or more chronic conditions

Chronic diseases can affect a person's ability to perform essential activities, significantly reducing their quality of life.

#### Top 10 most diagnosed chronic diseases are:

1. Hypertension (High blood pressure)
2. High cholesterol
3. Arthritis
4. Coronary heart disease
5. Diabetes
6. Chronic kidney disease
7. Heart failure
8. Depression
9. Alzheimers
10. Dementia

*Font: National Council on Aging (NCOA)*

Chronic illnesses were **responsible for 71% of global deaths** before COVID-19, and they are expected to remain problematic for many years to come. Since the average age of the worldwide population is continuously increasing, NCDs are only becoming more prevalent.

**Early studies** show that the health of your employees impacts much more than the bottom line, and has a significant influence on your entire organisation. That is why wellbeing initiatives are becoming top of mind for most employers. When **global healthcare spend is expected to rise 5% over the next four years**, measures to help cope with chronic conditions will go a long way to encourage workers to become more involved, productive and happy in the workplace.

But why do corporations play an essential role? **Research shows** that people with a chronic health condition should continue working. Work contributes to a person's general mental development and to the understanding of the significant roles each one of us plays not only at work but also at home and within society.

One group that is often overlooked is employees that act as carers for family members. They're often required to work out the best way to manage their situation with little support. For both individuals with NCDs or those who care for them depression can often be a common occurrence.

In the corporate world, the effects of having employees affected by their chronic illnesses are undoubtedly adverse. Still, there are several ways that you as a leader can help to overcome these undesirable outcomes in your workplace.



# 3

## A step by step on how to manage chronic conditions at work

The presence of chronic diseases in the workplace can often result in illnesses that affect wages, workforce participation and retention. When too many workers need to leave their jobs permanently due to health problems, companies all over the world need to stop and understand they should be made a priority and efforts need to be made to create lasting change.

A conference held in Brussels called *[Working with a Chronic Illness](#)* brought together politicians, business people and leaders to promote a 'Declaration on Workplace Health Practices for Employees with Chronic Illness' which outlined actionable steps that any company can take to combat against chronic illnesses.

### **Detect and adjust early.**

Providing the right conditions that can be flexible to the needs of your employees is a crucial factor in building a successful team. Even if a chronic illness does not have a direct effect on performance, leaders must understand the need to adapt, and receive appropriate training to help them identify situations that may cause problems for their employees with chronic illnesses. Anticipating challenges should be a frequent practice to encourage development and trust.



## Address discrimination against people with chronic diseases.

In the health care system, one in five patients with a chronic disease has reported experiencing discrimination. As a leader, remind your employees about privacy and confidentiality, but most importantly, that you are dedicated to creating a safe place for individuals to work while respecting physical and mental boundaries.



## Increase the opportunities for those with chronic illnesses.

Appropriate training on chronic diseases and how to deal with them should be considered essential for any HR leader, business manager and executive. Providing your team with the tools to identify their employees' abilities and how they compliment the needs of your organisation is a significant opportunity to increase opportunities and recognise individual talents. Employment, engagement rates and retention reach a peak when leaders know how to accommodate for their employees needs adequately.



## Reinforce individual talents.

Focus on what unique qualities and skills each team member can add to your organisation. From social skills to particular technical abilities, people will perform better when they are recognised by their strengths, their participation in a meeting or involvement in a specific project.





## Create a healthy return to work.

A strategic part of managing team members with a chronic illness is planning their return to work.

Empathy and clear communication are critical to ensure a successful approach. When employees return to work, they should find recommendations and assistance that may involve fitness practices, wellbeing tools and mental health support. When employees know they can still thrive at work without being pushed beyond their limits, the results are beneficial to both the individual, the team and the organization as a whole.

## Implement flexible hours policies.

Flexibility can help employees affected by chronic conditions to perform better in the workplace. Working from home, part-time or flexible hours are straightforward and compelling options that offer real benefits for the team and individuals.



## Reduce the physical or mental demands of work.

Some employees will need more frequent breaks, a reduction of workload, access to private areas to take medication, equipment modifications and professional support. These steps can be adopted by companies to avoid the aggravation of chronic diseases, and develop a humanised approach to HR, providing teams with access to specialists in fitness, wellness and self-care.





## Encourage effective teamwork.

Creating an inclusive company culture where team members are accommodating to colleagues is essential. Beyond offering solutions to your employees, it is also important to ensure that your entire team is aware and involved in the process of integrating them. Employees with special needs should be encouraged to share what they need to support them at work. Peers should also have access to technical information and best practices on how to do so, such as open talking sessions or therapy sessions.



## Consider a career review.

A person dealing with a chronic condition may sometimes think he or she is no longer able to perform at work, but even healthy employees would benefit from doing a career review. Reviews should include topics concerning individuals' needs and priorities to enable planning for potential challenges in the workplace, aiming to help individuals and leaders to take appropriate precautions preventing aggravation. Don't forget to consider the need for training and to reskill.



## Provide access to wellbeing tools.

While mental and physical health issues are a very personal matter, employees shouldn't have to deal with them alone. Some of the things you can do to support your employees include; provide access to therapy, coaching, e-learning, medical, fitness and nutrition tools that will help them in addressing their personal needs and develop a healthier lifestyle.



# 4

## Promoting a healthier routine to manage chronic diseases

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), every adult needs a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week (30 minutes of any exercise per day). For individuals living with chronic diseases, working out can be even more important to prevent certain symptoms. Combining activities with a balanced diet can be a powerful yet simple way to manage chronic conditions, promoting a more stable and healthy routine. Below are a handful of recommendations:

### 1. Get moving

The practice of aerobic exercise can reduce pathologies linked to heart conditions, given the efficient distribution of oxygen to large muscle groups. Also, these exercises keep the body active to control blood pressure, and help individuals lose weight.

### 2. Be well-nourished

A healthy diet is fundamental to improve levels of cholesterol, glucose and blood pressure to beat many chronic diseases and build eating habits that benefit both body and mind. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, grains and lean proteins is highly impactful for those suffering from obesity, hypertension, diabetes or cardiovascular diseases.

### 3. Make time to relax

Save a few minutes of the day to meditate and be present in the moment. Anxiety and stress are dangerous enemies of almost all chronic diseases, and mindfulness or breathing techniques can be very effective against depression and obesity, for example.

Armed with the right tools and knowledge, the corporate world can be a place of fulfilment for individuals with chronic illnesses, especially when they receive the proper support.

Experienced leaders and HR executives already have the tools required to make work a safe place for anyone. Creating an environment that encourages wellness and wellbeing will not only help individuals make the most of their time at work jobs but also allow companies to create a positive and inclusive culture that benefits everyone.





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