

Chronic Health Conditions



What is a chronic health condition and how does it impact the life of someone who has one?

Chronic health conditions are conditions that last one year or more and require ongoing medical attention or limit activities of daily life or both. Many are invisible illnesses. In fact, those with chronic conditions may not identify as having an illness but know they are managing their conditions long-term. Several chronic conditions are not well understood by the general public and sometimes by health care providers. This lack of understanding can contribute to feelings of isolation or hopelessness.

Six in 10 adults in the US have a chronic health condition and 4 in 10 have 2 or more. Over 40% of school-aged children and adolescents have at least one chronic health condition.

Some chronic health conditions are prevalent and well-known, while others are quite rare. Just a few examples of chronic health conditions are below:

- Allergies and Food Intolerances
- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Chronic Pain
- Cystic Fibrosis
- Fibromyalgia
- Diabetes
- Digestive Disorders such as Celiac, Colitis, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Gaucher Disease
- Mental Illness
- Migraine and Headache
- Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS)
- Heart Disease and Stroke
- Long haul COVID
- Lupus
- Lyme Disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Obesity
- Sjogren's Syndrome
- Tay-Sachs Disease

For those with chronic health conditions, having good support from others is key. People who have strong social support networks tend to do better long-term.

How to support those with chronic health conditions:

- 1. Show compassion and empathy.** While there are several phrases that can be demeaning (e.g., “stay positive,” “you look fine,” “this will pass”) words can also demonstrate compassion: “I am sorry.” “I imagine that must be difficult to manage.” “I am here for you.” “What level is your pain at today?” “How is your energy level today?” Be the person that can be counted on when the going gets rough. That sometimes means just being present and listening.
- 2. Do some research.** Learn the medical name of the condition, how to pronounce it, some of the symptoms and what it is like to live with the condition from the patient perspective. Many people with chronic conditions have to explain their disability over and over, which can be exhausting.
- 3. Show interest and ask if you can help with specific tasks.** Often those with chronic conditions can feel isolated, alone or misunderstood. Defined actions, such as helping with a physically demanding chore, getting an icepack, or providing foods that meet digestive needs, can be very meaningful. Offer to do a certain job as opposed to asking vaguely, “What can I do for you?” and leaving the burden with that person. At the same time, don’t assume help is always needed or take it personally if help is rejected. Those with chronic conditions often have good days and bad days and may want to do things for themselves. Let them be your guide.
- 4. Understand that many people with chronic conditions may also live with anxiety and depression.** Chronic health conditions can affect a person’s life in various emotional ways. For some, living with a chronic condition can definitely bring on dark and difficult periods. Let them know you are there for them no matter what they are feeling: “This is really hard.” “I’m thinking of you.” “I’m here for you.”
- 5. Know that sometimes it’s just not possible to commit, show up or respond.** When health is unpredictable, committing to a gathering, a meeting or a Shabbat dinner may not be feasible. Similarly, just because someone doesn’t show up or respond to a text, email or phone call doesn’t indicate a lack of interest or engagement. Trust that those with chronic conditions are doing their best and provide continued love and understanding.

ALTERNATE PRAYER FOR HEALING (MISHEBARACH)

May the One who blessed our ancestors —
Who named us Israel (Yisrael), those who “struggle,”
Bless and heal those among us who struggle with a sense of complete well-being.

May they acknowledge their own strength and resilience in persevering,
May they treat themselves with forgiveness and patience,
May they find others who share their experiences, so they know they are not alone,
May they find help, compassion, and resources when they are able to reach out for them,
May they find others willing to reach out first when they cannot,
And may they find inclusive and welcoming communities that will uplift and celebrate them.

May the Holy One grant us the strength and resilience to support our loved ones,
May we find the patience and forgiveness we need for ourselves and others,
May we find solidarity and support from other caregivers,
May we find the capacity to listen without judgement and with the intention to help when asked,
May we find the ability to notice when others are struggling and reach out to them first,
And may we create communities that accept, uplift, and celebrate those among us who are struggling.

Adapted from Blue Dove Foundation

To learn more about Jewish Disabilities Advocates visit jewishfamilyservice.org/jda.

Sources: Center for Disease Control, American Psychological Association, AgingCare.com, CreakyJoints.Org, Healthline.com