

USU Researchers Find 80 Percent of Adults With Disabilities Report Chronic Illnesses Nationwide

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Researchers Rachel Byers and Audrey Juhasz

Researchers from USU's Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice recently found that 80 percent of adults with disabilities nationwide reported having at least 1 of 11 chronic health conditions. Many of the reported illnesses are preventable, manageable and even curable.

Those were just some of the conclusions from a data analysis of the [2022 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey](#).

Their work was intended to inform public policymakers on the greatest needs in the disability population. "Prevalence of Chronic Health Conditions Among People with Disabilities in the United States" was written by Audrey Juhasz and Rachel Byers. It is available in [Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation](#).

"We intentionally didn't make comparisons to people without disabilities because we hypothesized that there are differences within disability types. We wanted to show that 'people with disabilities' aren't just one monolithic group," Juhasz said.

The fact that 80 percent of people with disabilities report a chronic condition should speak for itself.

"It's notable, regardless of the comparison," Byers said. The conditions reported in the study included arthritis, asthma, cancer, COPD, depression, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, obesity and stroke.

Disability, Chronic Illness, and Geography

The researchers also drilled down to better understand how those chronic illnesses were distributed according to disability and geographic area.

They hoped to find indicators that perhaps one part of the country was doing better than the rest in terms of chronic illness so that policymakers could identify strategies that may improve outcomes in those high performing areas.

Instead, Juhasz said, no state really stood out as having statistically significant, lower rates of chronic illness among people with disabilities.

Types of Disability and Chronic Conditions

The researchers found that people with hearing- and vision-related disabilities had the lowest prevalence of chronic conditions, and those with self-care and independent living disabilities had the highest. Arthritis and depression were the most common chronic health conditions, and older groups were more likely to experience chronic illness. It is important to recognize that there is a bidirectional relationship between chronic health conditions and disabilities: disability can be caused by a chronic condition, and previous research shows people with disabilities are more likely to develop chronic conditions. However, many of the reported chronic conditions can be improved.

In a time when budgets are tight, the authors hope this research will help guide interventions and prevention strategies to tailor services for people with a variety of disabilities. "When you went from ages 18 to 44, to 45 to 65, and then 65 plus, prevalence went up," Juhasz said. "Which makes sense. You're getting older, you're more likely to have a chronic health condition. But also, it just highlights that if that's the only thing that's making the difference, we do need programs that are supporting all people with disabilities. It doesn't matter their gender or their ethnicity or their geographic region."

Disability and Health Education

The data analysis was unable to explore the causes for disability or chronic illness, Byers said, but other research has established that people with disabilities are often left out of health education.

"If we aren't including people with disabilities and making sure that they are part of our health education, we can't expect them to have preventative health literacy," Byers said.

It's important to recognize that chronic health problems are complex and there are many other possible causes, Juhasz said, "but health literacy is something that is actionable."

"Prevention is always less expensive than intervention," Byers added.

Their research was supported by IDRPP researchers Heather Kelly and Ty Aller. The team also produced an accessible infographic with information [specific to the Mountain West](#).

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The Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice is part of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU.