



## **Students with IBD: a guide for students going to university or college**

### **Introduction**

Planning to go to university or college can be an exciting but daunting time for anyone. If you have Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) – Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis (UC) – you are likely to face even greater challenges and have more concerns and questions. This guide sets out to give you some tips and suggestions about what to do beforehand and while at uni or college to help you make the most of your time there.

### **Arranging accommodation**

One of your first decisions will be about which colleges to apply to. You may want to be within reach of home to avoid moving or to go further afield, which means you will want to know what kind of accommodation is offered. Many students choose university halls of residence, as this is usually a good way to get to know people. Alternatively, you could look for private accommodation, sharing a flat or house or renting a room as a lodger. University housing services, particularly in large cities, often have a housing database and provide advice.

It helps to make your choice early before accommodation you'd find suitable is booked up. If opting for halls of residence, you could ask how far these are from lecture halls, to ensure you wouldn't have far to travel between the two. It's also a good idea to find out if en-suite facilities are available and whether they're entirely private or shared with another room, as is sometimes the case. If you are unable to obtain en-suite accommodation you could check how many rooms are allocated to each bathroom and if suitable ask for a room nearest to the bathrooms.

There is often the expectation that students move out of halls into shared houses after the first year and this is often arranged within the first few months. You will need to plan ahead if you wish to make special arrangements for your second year.

Your decision may also depend on whether you wish to be in catered or self-catering halls. You may find it easier to have meals cooked for you or on the other hand, if you have to be careful about what you eat, you may prefer to cook yourself.

For further information on accommodation see the Disabled Students' Guide to University listed at the end. To search for all types of housing or to find housemates check the following websites: [www.accommodationforstudents.com](http://www.accommodationforstudents.com); [www.homesforstudents.co.uk](http://www.homesforstudents.co.uk).

### **Access to disability services**

You may not see yourself as having a disability, but having Crohn's or UC means you may often need extra support, which others are not likely to be aware of. As soon as you receive confirmation of your place at university, contact their Disability office to let them know you

National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease

4 Beaumont House, Sutton Road, St Albans, Herts AL1 5HH. Tel. 01727 830038. Website: [www.nacc.org.uk](http://www.nacc.org.uk)  
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have IBD as they can help you to access a lot of useful services. You will have to provide confirmation of your condition from your doctor. Disability rights in education are becoming more established and you'd expect to find a Disability Officer in all higher education institutions. It might help to give them a copy of NACC's publication 'Students with IBD: a guide for universities and colleges'.

You could apply for the DSA (Disabled Students Allowance) to help you meet any extra costs or expenses that arise because of your condition, such as en-suite accommodation. For further details see Skill (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) listed at the end. The University Disability Officer may be able to help you with applying for the DSA.

"My uni really helped me push my assessment through and gave me loads of support. The assessment was fine, took about an hour and I just had a chat with the assessor ... I received payment for my laptop, a keyboard, mouse, laptop stand, printer, scanner, £100 printing and copying allowance and a £158 internet allowance."

"My DSA also supplied me with a laptop etc, but they also gave me a travel allowance of £100 to get a taxi if I feel unwell and need to get home quickly because it's about twice as quick as any of the bus routes."

Students with IBD who got the DSA

You could also ask the university about government funded Access to Learning Funds. These are generally means tested, but those with a disability are given priority.

## Getting medical help

If you're studying away from home you will have to register with the University Health Service or a local GP, which will mean a change of doctor. You can search for GP surgeries through your local library, on the NHS website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) or by phoning NHS Direct on 0845 4647. Building a good relationship with your new doctor can be important to give you the support you need if you have a flare up. They should be sent your existing medical records so should be aware of your condition. It helps to ensure that your IBD is on the appointment system notes of your health centre or GP surgery to give you priority for an appointment.

It would be useful to ask your gastroenterologist who to contact if you need access to specialist services while away from home. Additionally, it may be helpful to discuss with them or a Specialist Nurse a plan of action to follow should your symptoms flare up and to keep a record of this with important phone numbers. It might also be a good idea to take a good supply of medication when you first leave home.

## Getting support for your studies

It would be helpful for you to speak to your personal tutor, if you have one, or to your head of department as soon as possible about your condition and what this will mean. The earlier you're able to establish understanding with the appropriate people the more likely you are to feel more confident and less stressed. You may feel embarrassed about this, but the more honest you can be, the more help you stand to gain. It might help you to give them a copy of NACC's guide for universities and colleges. Students with IBD have found the following points useful to raise:

- **Toilet needs during lectures, seminars and exams** – sitting close to the exit in order to leave the room quickly. You could request the use of a locker by toilet facilities to keep spare clothes and washing kit in case of accidents, as well as permission to use staff lavatories.
- **Lateness** – you may arrive late because of urgent toilet needs or due to tiredness and/or painful joints slowing you down.
- **Taking medication** – you may need to take medication during lectures/seminars.
- **Eating between breaks** – you may need to eat during lectures/seminars if you have to eat small amounts regularly.
- **Feeling unwell** – there may be times when you're feeling exhausted and in pain and need to take a brief rest or even return to your accommodation.
- **Missing college** – you may miss college because of medical and hospital appointments, hospital admissions or being ill at home.
- **Field trips** – it may be difficult for you to go on a trip with the unpredictability of the condition. You're also likely to be worried about toilet facilities during a trip. You could ask whether you would be able to delay any decision about being able to go until the day or close to the day before committing yourself financially.
- **Privacy** – you may want your condition kept private or you may prefer others to know about your illness.

## Coursework extensions

One of your main concerns is likely to be about getting work in on time, especially when you're having a flare-up or have to be hospitalised. When negotiating coursework extensions try to be realistic about how much time you need to recover and how much work you can do when you're still not feeling completely well. Your tutor may agree to automatic extensions for when you are ill or hospitalised.

## Coping with exams

The intense pressure of exams affects most people and having IBD you may find the stress triggers a flare-up. Try to pace yourself and find ways that help you to relax, such as taking regular exercise, deep breathing exercises, yoga or aromatherapy.

If you've talked to your tutor about your condition, you could make advance arrangements for exams to have a seat close to the exit nearest the lavatories and to request extra time if needed. You may need to provide a medical certificate from your doctor. In some circumstances, if you're unable to get out of the house, you may be able to sit an examination at home.

## **Other support**

Sometimes the pressure of exams, coursework, being away from home, feeling isolated when ill – any or all of these – may become too much to deal with on your own, even if you have the support of friends and family. If you do find you're feeling anxious, stressed and/or depressed, you can turn to the counselling service at your college in complete confidence. It's better to seek help when you begin to have difficulties, so they may be resolved more quickly, rather than waiting until a problem has grown very serious. Counselling can help with all kinds of issues, such as dealing with dilemmas or making difficult decisions or choices, relationship difficulties, sexual problems or identity issues.

## **Managing your social life**

Meeting new people usually means wondering when to tell them about your IBD and everyone has their own way of dealing with this. Some students with IBD find it easier not to mention it at first until they get to know people better: talking about yourself and your interests rather than mentioning your illness and things you can't do. If you do feel unwell during the first few weeks, you could just say you have a 'tummy bug'. Others feel they want to be open from the beginning and if people can't deal with the truth, then they can't be good friends anyway. If you don't want to go into details you could say you have a gut condition which means you have to rush to the loo frequently. However, whichever approach you take, in time as you make friends, you are likely to know who will be understanding and who you can trust to talk to about your IBD. Having a supportive network of friends and family who understand the condition and can offer support when it is really needed is particularly important.

Having IBD, you may be more mindful about what you eat and drink. This may make you feel different, particularly if you avoid alcohol during 'freshers' week when there tend to be a lot of activities around the bar. But remember that people are teetotalers for a variety of reasons and this is usually respected. You could think ahead about how you'd respond to any comments on your staying off alcohol.

If you're sharing accommodation you may choose to cook your own food. Having good nutrition is particularly important with IBD to help the body strengthen its resistance to illness. (For further information on diet contact NACC for a copy of the booklet 'Food and IBD'.)

It can be tempting to throw yourself into college life, but it may help not to go beyond your limits just to fit in. Pushing your body too far may make you feel ill for longer, so that you end up missing out more in the long run than if you paced yourself in the beginning. Feeling ill is also likely to affect your ability to do coursework, which is just as important.

When you do have good days, try to do as much as you reasonably can in terms of being sociable and doing your work, as you don't know when a bad day will come along, which could restrict what you are able to do. Just try to take each day as it comes and see how you feel.

## Additional support

The National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease (NACC) offers Educational and Vocational Grants for young people with IBD between the ages of 15 and 25. Details of these are in the Personal Grants page of the NACC website: [www.nacc.org.uk](http://www.nacc.org.uk) or from the NACC office.

NACC has groups around the UK, some with groups for young people, and you might find it helpful to contact the group nearest to your college. Check the NACC website or office for locations.

A discussion board for young people between the ages of 16 and 29 is available via the NACC website: [www.ibdandme.co.uk](http://www.ibdandme.co.uk).

NACC operates a supportive listening service called **NACC-in-Contact** on **0845 130 3344** run by trained volunteers with personal experience of IBD.

## And finally...

Take time to plan, talk to the relevant people and develop a supportive network – don't wait until you are feeling unwell and having a flare-up before you seek help.

There may be setbacks along the way, such as having to take time out. If this means taking an extra year, it might quite understandably seem like a lot of time, but try to keep in mind that in the long run it's not going to make a lot of difference.

"One thing I would say is don't let having IBD stop you from achieving anything. I refuse to let my disease get the better of me."

Helen - a student with IBD

## Further information

### NACC

For further information on any aspect of IBD and for full details about all NACC's publications and services please contact our **Information Line: 0845 130 2233** or check our **website: [www.nacc.org.uk](http://www.nacc.org.uk)**.

### Skill

National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1 3JW. Information Service: ☎ **0800 328 5050**.  
E-mail: [info@skill.org.uk](mailto:info@skill.org.uk) Website: [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

**Disabled Students' Guide to University 2005 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.** Ed. Emma Caprez. Trotman Publishing.

Information on academic and cultural provisions at each institution, as well as summaries of each institution's disability statement, contact details for disability coordinators at each institution, information on facilities and access for disabled students and on getting about in the local area.

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*This document has been prepared by NACC as general information on the subject and is not intended to replace specific advice from a health professional. Nor are any of the products mentioned endorsed or recommended by NACC.*

The National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease (NACC) is a voluntary Association, established in 1979, which has 30,000 members and 70 Groups throughout the United Kingdom. The Association also provides a supportive listening service called NACC-in-Contact which is available to anyone affected by Inflammatory Bowel Disease.

Membership of the Association costs £12 for the first year and £10 subsequently. Additional donations to help the work of the Association are always welcomed.

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