

Chronic conditions are widespread yet remain invisible

Hidden in plain sight: seeing the whole person living with a chronic condition



One in three people live with a chronic condition*. This translates to more than two billion individuals facing daily challenges that often go unseen. Convatec partners with people every day to help them overcome these challenges and live life on their terms.

In 2025, Convatec commissioned new research to explore the continuum of chronic care — from diagnosis to building support networks to navigating stigma and misunderstanding. This survey gathered insights from more than 10,000 adults, including 3,400 people living with chronic conditions across the UK, Brazil, Germany, Italy and the United States, with a particular focus on ostomy and continence care.

The findings reveal a stark truth: stigma remains hidden in plain sight. Of those living with a chronic condition, 84% said their condition is invisible to others. Nearly 60% downplay their condition to avoid making people uncomfortable, and 21% do not feel emotionally supported. There is a clear gap in understanding and support.

PERCEPTION GAPS BETWEEN PATIENTS AND THE PUBLIC

What strikes me most about these findings is the gap between perception and reality. When the public thinks about chronic conditions, they often imagine limitation and dependency: 82% believe chronic conditions hurt job performance, and 67% think they strain relationships.

The reality is far more optimistic. Most people living with chronic conditions lead full, independent, meaningful lives. They work, travel, maintain relationships, and pursue their passions. The challenge is not their capability, but rather a collective failure to understand and support them appropriately.

This perception gap matters because it shapes everything from workplace policies to healthcare provision to social interactions. When limitations are assumed, barriers are created. But by diving deeper into someone's authentic experience, more effective and meaningful support can be provided.

THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Physical challenges like managing symptoms, adapting to new routines, adjusting to new products or treatments, and navigating medical appointments, are well known. What is often overlooked is the emotional toll.

Convatec's research reveals that over half of patients feel overwhelmed or depressed at diagnosis, and 40% continue to feel misunderstood by

others even after adjusting to their condition.

This isolation can be as debilitating as the physical condition itself. Patients describe feeling pressured to downplay their needs to avoid making others uncomfortable. They learn to hide their challenges rather than seek support.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

For patients, accessible support and resources can be transformative. Convatec's free me + programme, launched with the support of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) a decade ago, provides expert product advice and practical guidance that helps people requiring stoma or continence care adapt to their new normal with confidence.

Healthcare leaders also have a responsibility to break down barriers through education and services that address not just the clinical aspects of chronic conditions, but also the emotional, social and practical dimensions. Convatec is committed to this holistic approach, pairing innovative products with resources that empower patients with knowledge and choices.

As a healthcare business, we have a responsibility as well; coupling access to support with products that do not just treat chronic conditions, but enable full and confident lives. Convatec's vision is *pioneering trusted medical solutions to improve the lives we touch*. It means constantly innovating to create new and better products and services that help people live with more independence and autonomy — we have a mindset that is about solutions not just products. Whether it is designing skin-friendly adhesives, developing discreet



Bruno Pinheiro, president and chief operating officer, Ostomy Care, Convatec

and comfortable ostomy bags like Esteem Body™ with Leak Defense™, or creating digital tools that help users manage their care, the goal is always the same: to make life easier, safer, and more dignified. We call that *forever caring*, our brand promise to all those who rely on Convatec's trusted medical solutions.

The invisibility of chronic conditions is not inevitable. But because they are hidden in plain sight, we need to speak up. We owe everyone living with chronic conditions our support.



Sue Pridham, head of clinical and nursing service, Convatec

As nurses, we are trained to assess, diagnose, and treat. But over the years, I have learned that clinical expertise alone is not enough. Real support means listening to understand, not just listening to treat.

As a clinical nurse specialist in stoma care and lead of a team of specialist nurses and clinical educators, this resonates strongly with me. A couple of years ago, during preparations for a support session for people who recently began living with an ostomy bag, there was some apprehension about raising topics like intimacy and workplace advocacy within the 'Living with a stoma' forum. These conversations often feel sensitive, and we were not sure how they would be received. To our pleasant surprise, the response was overwhelmingly positive. People wanted to talk about these issues, and I was grateful for the opportunity to create that space. Over and over, we heard: 'This is exactly the kind of support we needed, but we didn't know how to ask'.

That experience gave me a new perspective on what adequate care really means for people living with chronic conditions. It is not just about teaching technical skills; it is about understanding what matters most to patients — their relationships, their work, their sense of self. These are the aspects of life that chronic conditions affect but can often be lost in clinical consultations. When we create safe spaces for these conversations, the impact can be transformative.

NURSES ARE THE GATEWAY FOR SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

One of the biggest gaps in care happens after diagnosis. Patients receive a diagnosis, undergo necessary procedures, learn basic management skills, and then, too often, end up feeling lost as their recovery begins at home. They have questions about long-term management and available resources, but without clear guidance, they can struggle to find answers without support. Convatec's research reflects this reality:

- 49% of those with chronic conditions have felt misunderstood or dismissed when discussing their condition
- That number jumps to 62% among those requiring ostomy or continence care
- Even in healthcare settings, 43% said they often need to advocate for themselves because their condition is misunderstood; a figure that rises to 60% for ostomy and continence care patients.

Resources exist that can reverse this trend. Directing patients to support organisations like Colostomy UK or the United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc., educational tools like Convatec's me+ programme, and peer networks should be standard practice, not an optional extra. These resources provide the ongoing support that healthcare systems often cannot deliver due to time and resource constraints. Every patient deserves to know what is available and how to access it.

PATIENT EMPOWERMENT DRIVES BETTER OUTCOMES

Empowerment is perhaps the most overlooked aspect of chronic condition

management. Many patients do not realise they have choices in their care. They assume they must accept whatever product or approach is initially offered, unaware that alternatives exist that might better suit their lifestyle, body, or preferences.

When people are educated, they are empowered. When they understand they can request different products or adjust their care plan, they become active participants in managing their condition. This shift leads to better long-term outcomes because patients are more engaged and confident in advocating for their needs.

This is holistic care in practice. It means treating the person with all their unique circumstances, preferences, and priorities, not just the condition. And the evidence is clear: this approach improves outcomes and reduces strain on healthcare systems. It is not just compassionate; it is clinically effective and economically sensible.

The shift required is not complicated, but it does require intention. It means building extra minutes into consultations for open-ended questions, keeping updated lists of support resources, and asking patients not just 'How is your stoma?' but also 'How are you managing?'

Everyone in the healthcare community has a role in normalising these conversations, making support as accessible as clinical care, and treating the whole person. When we do this consistently, we can transform the experience of living with a chronic condition. **GPN**

* Convatec first identified the '1 in 3' prevalence of hidden and chronic conditions in its 2022 'Hidden Illnesses' study, and has continued to track and validate this finding in subsequent global research, including recent research across 13 countries for its Care Gap Series (<https://ow.ly/JN9150Y0GaV>) and five countries for its new report, *Perspectives on living with chronic conditions* (www.convatec.com/ostomy-care/campaigns/chronic-conditions/).