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Record numbers not working due to ill health

By Nick Edser & Ben King Business reporters

6-7 minutes



Getty Images

The number of people not working in the UK due to long-term sickness has risen to a new record, official figures show.

More than two and a half million are not working due

to health problems, the Office for National Statistics said.

It blamed an increase in mental health issues in younger people and people suffering back and neck pain, possibly due to home working, for the rise.

Typically, for every 13 people currently working, one person is long-term sick.

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, there were "well over 400,000 more people outside of the labour market due to ill health," Darren Morgan, director of economic statistics at the ONS, told the BBC's Today Programme.

As well as an increase in mental health conditions and back and neck pains, Mr Morgan said there had also been "an increase in the category that includes post-viral fatigue, so perhaps long Covid having an impact".

One of the reasons why the UK economy has been doing less well than other developed nations has been the case of the missing workers, after millions stopped working during the pandemic.

Getting these people back to work is a key part of

the government's plan to get the economy growing again with [changes to the rules around health-related benefits and universal credit](#) in the March Budget aimed at helping to address the shortage of workers.

The latest figures show mixed progress on this front. Significant numbers of students, carers and even some retired people have started looking for work again, pushing the inactivity rate - the key measure of people not in work - down to 21% - the lowest level in three years.

However, the rise in the number of people too ill to work is likely to worry policymakers.

"We should be concerned by the high number of people who are economically inactive because they are sick, and progress on tackling inactivity overall is too slow," said Neil Carberry, chief executive at the industry body the Recruitment and Employment Confederation.

"It is a year since the ONS reported on high worklessness, labour shortages and high inflation and too little has changed. This is holding the economy back by constraining companies' ability to

grow."

COST OF LIVING Tackling it together



How can I avoid back and neck problems?

By Michelle Roberts, digital health editor

Sitting with proper posture is one of the best things you can do to prevent back and neck problems.

So it is easy to see how spending long hours sitting at a desk, hunched over a laptop could be bad for you.

The latest data from the ONS suggests musculoskeletal issues are on the rise, and likely linked to the shift to home working that happened to many of us during the pandemic.

If you use a home workstation, the advice is to make sure the top of your computer screen is level with your eyes and about an arm's length away from you.

You should be able to relax your shoulders when you are typing and keep your elbows at 90 degrees.

Take regular breaks too to stand up, stretch and move around.

If you have neck or back pain, chat with your doctor or see a physiotherapist.

[Employers are also required by law](#) to protect the health and safety of their workers

Ian, 48, from Manchester used to work in software support, but back and leg problems forced him to leave his job, and he's now waiting for surgery on his back.

He told the BBC he's "frustrated" but hopes he can return to work at some point.

However, he thinks he will be at a disadvantage when applying for jobs. "The tone changes in the interview," he says, when you tell a potential employer that you have health problems.

James, 39, from Durham has been given time off work after having problems with his eyesight.

He was recently diagnosed with diabetes and says working from home has led to an unhealthy lifestyle.

"My eyesight was badly affected because blood

sugar levels were so high. I couldn't really look at screens, so couldn't do work properly."

He also says it can be difficult to set up a work desk correctly at home. "In an office, someone sets up the chair properly, they have screens that protect eyes. There are more precautions."

Pay squeeze

The latest ONS figures also showed the squeeze on pay remains, with wage increases failing to keep up with rising prices.

Growth in regular pay, which excludes bonuses, was 6.7% in the first three months of the year, and pay growth in the public sector was 5.6% - the highest rate since 2003.

However, when price rises are taken into account, regular pay fell by 2%.

- the employment rate edged up to 75.9% between January and March, helped by more part-time employees and self-employed workers
- the unemployment rate also rose slightly to 3.9%
- the number of people on employers' payrolls

dropped in April, the first decline in more than two years

- job vacancy numbers fell for the 10th consecutive period, although there are still more than one million unfilled posts
- the number of working days lost to strikes rose to 556,000 in March 2023, mainly due to walkouts in the health and education sectors.

In response to the latest figures, the Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, said: "It's encouraging that the unemployment rate remains historically low but difficulty in finding staff and rising prices are a worry for many families and businesses."

But shadow work and pensions secretary Jonathan Ashworth said the government was a "drag" on the economy with family finances "being squeezed to breaking point by a further fall in real wages" and with fewer people in employment than before the pandemic.

Additional reporting by Victoria Park and Emily Roberts