

8 conditions that are particularly complex to adjudicate

When evaluating SSDI claims, disability examiners from the Social Security Administration (SSA) look for medical evidence confirming that claimants are unable to perform any kind of work due to their disabling condition(s). This can be more difficult in claims that are not so objectively easy to “prove.” This includes claims that largely cite evidence from psychiatric treatment, those where pain is the primary symptom (especially nerve pain), and claims based on extremely specific conditions or symptoms, as diagnoses must meet SSA’s standard listing criteria to be awarded. These claims often need to be appealed to the Hearing level to be decided by an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ), and even though ALJs are given latitude in making decisions, such nuanced cases can still be difficult to present. We’ve compiled this list of 8 conditions that are particularly difficult to adjudicate.

1 Anxiety

According to SSA’s rules, claimants must meet an extensive burden of proof to have their SSDI claim approved due to an anxiety-related disorder, since they are largely supported by psychiatric treatment records, which can be viewed more subjectively than physical medical evidence like x-rays or lab results. The cited condition(s) must be characterized by multiple documented symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance. Claimants must also demonstrate extreme limitations in specific areas of mental functioning (interacting with others, adapting to change, etc.) or have a documented history of treatment and professional capacity assessments over a period of at least two years.

2 Post-traumatic stress disorder & obsessive-compulsive disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a nuanced anxiety disorder that can be triggered by a traumatic event or experience. Individuals with PTSD may struggle to ask for help – and, even with treatment, they are at risk for additional problems like substance abuse, eating disorders, heart issues, and self-harm. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is another chronic psychiatric condition that causes obsessive thoughts and invasive ideas or feelings that demand compulsive behaviors – many of which can be harmful. Because PTSD and OCD are highly subjective in nature and can look drastically different in every case, SSA requires that claims must cite an official diagnosis, along with strong medical evidence that details specific ways in which the condition(s) limits claimants’ work abilities. For example, SSA requires documentation from medical professionals that claimants suffering from one of these conditions are unable to control their emotions, manage behaviors, complete basic tasks, adapt to change, or perform self-care – such determinations would indicate that they are not able to interact with others or consistently adhere to the demands of a job.

3 Fibromyalgia

The outlook for adjudicating fibromyalgia claims for SSDI benefits has begun to improve over time, as more information has been gathered about the nature and underlying cause of this condition. However, evaluating fibromyalgia claims can still be highly subjective. Because fibromyalgia presents quite differently from one person to another, historically, additional conditions have needed to be involved for claimants to have much hope for success in securing an SSDI approval. Many claimants with fibromyalgia also live with conditions like rheumatoid arthritis or spinal stenosis, which can be objectively determined through medical tests like x-rays; this increases the likelihood of success in securing an SSDI award. However, this is certainly not the case for everyone suffering from chronic fibromyalgia pain, and therefore disability examiners may be unable to approve based on the information on file.

4 Long-haul COVID

The CDC describes long-haul COVID as new, recurring, or ongoing health problems that occur four or more weeks after an initial COVID-19 infection. Because this is still a relatively new health phenomenon, claimants citing long-haul COVID may be less likely to be approved for SSDI benefits, particularly at the Initial and Reconsideration levels of the claims process. This is largely due to the fact that in order to qualify for SSDI benefits, it must be clearly determined that any cited condition(s) are expected to keep claimants out of work for at least 12 months. The unknown duration of long-haul COVID is not the only factor influencing how SSDI claims citing this condition are evaluated. In April of 2021, SSA issued an Emergency Message to help disability examiners in evaluating COVID claims, and while an update was issued in **August of 2022**, long-haul COVID still does not have a listing in SSA’s **Blue Book** Listing of Impairments, and therefore examiners do not have a strict or standard set of assessment criteria.

5 Lyme disease

Lyme disease is caused by a bacterial infection transmitted through a deer tick bite, which can lead to a myriad of health issues that may vary in severity and presentation from one person to another. This can make it increasingly difficult to diagnose and treat, while also making it more complicated for SSA to adjudicate SSDI claims citing Lyme disease. The symptoms of Lyme disease may mimic other less serious conditions that can be treated through medications, initially presenting as nothing more than fever, chills, body aches, or a rash. However, if the infection is not promptly diagnosed and treated, other bodily systems can be compromised. This leads to serious issues like debilitating fatigue, arthritis, heart problems, and memory loss. Lyme disease can also become chronic and cause permanent organ damage. Because it can be so difficult to formally diagnose, Lyme disease does not directly meet any of SSA’s Blue Book listings, and claimants with advanced symptoms are more likely to be awarded SSDI if their claim fits into other categories, such as musculoskeletal disorders or inflammatory arthritis.

6 Inflammatory bowel syndrome & inflammatory bowel disease

Inflammatory bowel syndrome (IBS) and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) are common intestinal disorders that are diagnosed in hundreds of thousands of Americans every year. Despite how commonly they occur, the guidelines to be approved for SSDI benefits due to IBS or IBD are extremely stringent. SSA looks for multiple medical evaluations, completed at least 60 days apart, with specific recurring symptoms being reported within a consecutive six-month period. As a result, determinations can be made before the medical evidence has fully matured. Because many individuals seeking SSDI benefits also struggle to maintain health insurance as more time passes during which they are unable to work, SSA’s requirements for such extensive, long-term monitoring of IBS and IBD can become burdensome for claimants who are told they need to continue treatments they cannot afford in order to receive benefits they need.

7 Migraines

Individuals who experience chronic migraines can have a difficult time completing simple daily tasks, let alone maintaining a job that may require significant time spent on screens, walking or completing other physical activities, and/or changing environments throughout the day. Because everyday factors like light and sound can cause severe physical symptoms, migraine sufferers may incur many absences from work due to the need to stay in a dark, quiet, and stable environment until the symptoms pass. Despite this, individuals who suffer from frequent migraines may have a difficult time being approved for SSDI benefits based on migraines alone, as this condition does not objectively meet any of SSA’s Blue Book listings. However, migraines are often symptoms of other health problems, like high blood pressure, anxiety or depression, epilepsy, and heart disease. Citing additional conditions with comprehensive treatment records is extremely valuable for SSA’s evaluation of migraine headache claims.

8 Chronic fatigue syndrome

There are currently no diagnostic tests to confirm a diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). As symptoms of CFS – memory loss, enlarged lymph nodes, poor sleep, and exhaustion lasting more than 24 hours after an activity – are common with other conditions, individuals are often diagnosed with CFS when all other diseases have been ruled out through testing. Because of this, claimants are often treated with skepticism regarding their condition. Even when they receive this diagnosis from their physician, that alone will not be enough to definitively prove disability to SSA, as they will also need to prove that the symptoms of CFS have lasted for more than six months. This will require making regular visits to their doctor, which can be difficult for many individuals whose primary symptom is extreme exhaustion.

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