

# The complex process of adjudicating SSDI claims citing pain conditions

Each year, tens of thousands of SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) applications include health conditions causing chronic and/or acute pain. **September is Pain Awareness Month**, and since pain evaluation is a key factor in the Social Security Administration's (SSA) claim adjudication process, we created this infographic to illustrate the many complexities that exist when SSDI applicants cite pain as a primary reason for being unable to work.

We will take a closer look at four conditions that cause chronic or acute pain and how disability examiners evaluate SSDI claims that reference these conditions.



## SOCIAL SECURITY RULINGS AND SSDI CLAIM ADJUDICATION

Social Security uses **SSDI regulations** and **Social Security Rulings (SSRs)** to evaluate SSDI claims and determine if an individual's medical condition is severe enough to prevent working for at least one year or result in death. Social Security Rulings are defined as a "series of precedential decisions relating to the programs administered by SSA and are published under the authority of the Commissioner of Social Security."

Published in the **Notices** section of the Federal Register, these decisions are considered public record and may be based on decisions made at any level of SSA's claim review process. Social Security Rulings are often used as precedents for comparison in the evaluation of SSDI cases citing similar conditions, which can be particularly useful for pain conditions that are often highly subjective in nature.

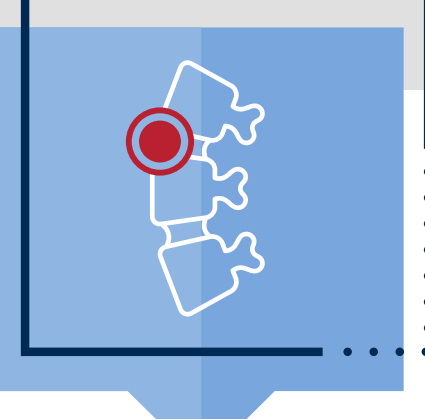
## DEGENERATIVE DISC DISEASE

**Degenerative Disc Disease (DDD)** is one of the most common impairments included in SSDI claims. DDD is the result of spinal discs wearing down due to normal aging and activities, with people over age 40 being particularly at risk. SSDI claims citing DDD can be complex due to the unpredictable and highly subjective nature of the condition. Pain levels will vary significantly from one person with DDD to another, and symptoms may come and go over time, with many people responding well to treatment.

Proving that a claimant's DDD claim meets SSA's strict definition of disability requires clear, objective evidence that the condition has resulted in a compromised nerve root of the spinal cord, spinal pain, mobility issues, and/or impaired function in other key areas. This means that extremely detailed medical records spanning a decent length of time are critical, as the claimant's testimony alone that they experience pain will not be considered sufficient proof.

If these criteria can be met and the condition cited on an SSDI claim can be matched with a musculoskeletal disease listed in SSA's regulations, an individual with enough work credits to qualify for SSDI could be awarded benefits.

[Click here to learn more about how SSA evaluates claims citing musculoskeletal conditions.](#)



Despite its prevalence, SSA does not have a specific Social Security Ruling for DDD. Rather, these claims are evaluated under the banner of musculoskeletal disorders, which include other conditions known to cause pain in the neck, back, and other parts of the body, such as:

- inflammatory arthritis,
- spinal stenosis,
- spinal arachnoiditis, and
- herniated discs.

## MIGRAINES AND HEADACHE DISORDERS

**Migraines and headache disorders** are also commonly included in SSDI claims as either a primary or secondary condition impacting an individual's ability to work. Because headache pain is so common and linked to numerous other health conditions, it can be difficult to establish it alone as a disabling impairment. Unsurprisingly, medical records are the most important factors in getting migraine and headache disorder claims approved, but they must be particularly comprehensive, including:

- Strong and thorough medical evidence clearly demonstrating the physical, mental, and emotional impact of the condition on the claimant's functional abilities and quality of life. This includes symptoms impacting the claimant's vision, speech, and motor skills, as well as dates and details of migraine-related episodes or events.
- Records of frequent and proactive treatment and doctor visits.
- The types of treatment received.
- Clear documentation that the claimant has been complaining of pain over an extended period of time.

Some severe headache disorders can limit one's physical and/or mental ability to do basic work activities. SSA considers all medical evidence when evaluating a headache claim, including diagnosis of a primary headache disorder by an acceptable medical source, observation of a typical headache event and all associated phenomena by an acceptable medical source, remarkable or unremarkable laboratory tests, and response to treatment. Whether treating remarks considered alternative medical and psychiatric causes of the claimant's symptoms is also considered, SSA will not award a claim citing migraine/headache pain based solely on statements of opinion from doctors or the claimants' accounts of their symptoms and their impact on daily life, though such statements are still valuable as supporting evidence.

[Click here to read SSA's Social Security Ruling for cases involving Primary Headache Disorders for more insight into how these claims are adjudicated.](#)



## REFLEX SYMPATHETIC DYSTROPHY (RSD) / CHRONIC REGIONAL PAIN SYNDROME (CRPS)

**Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD) / Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)** is a less common condition that causes severe chronic arm or leg pain, typically resulting from an injury or a fracture, surgery, or injury affecting another body part. The exact cause of RSD and CRPS isn't fully understood, but it is known that starting treatment early is critical to one's ability to live with minimal pain and reduce the likelihood of more severe outcomes. This is complicated because even a minor injury can trigger RSD/CRPS, making it difficult to detect at first since symptoms can begin very subtly.

Due to the importance of early diagnosis and treatment, consistent medical appointments are key for individuals with RSD/CRPS. This means keeping up with regular physical exams and being proactive about scheduling an appointment for new symptoms that may be worrisome instead of waiting for the next appointment to raise concerns with one's doctor. If RSD/CRPS is left untreated, symptoms may continue to worsen and can result in more disabling symptoms like tissue atrophy (of the skin, bones, or muscles) and muscle contractions.

[To help provide more clarity in these cases, SSA does have a Social Security Ruling for RSD/CRPS that explains how disability examiners should evaluate claims citing this impairment.](#)



## FIBROMYALGIA

**Fibromyalgia** is a chronic pain disorder that impacts the whole body and causes fatigue, sleep disturbances, and other symptoms such as memory problems, depression, anxiety, or irritable bowel syndrome. The cause of fibromyalgia is still not fully understood, which contributes to the challenges of evaluating SSDI claims including this condition.

Many claimants with fibromyalgia also live with conditions like rheumatoid arthritis or spinal stenosis, which can be objectively defined through medical tests, like x-rays, and 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 more reluctant to approve based on the information on file.

Social Security disability examiners will want to see evidence that other disorders that could cause the claimant's fibromyalgia symptoms have been excluded. This again highlights the importance of extensive medical testing that is clearly dated and documented – particularly in the form of lab tests that check blood levels, thyroid function, and more, as well as diagnostic imaging to assess any possible arthritis or other inflammatory factors.

[Click here to review the Social Security Ruling about fibromyalgia claim evaluation.](#)

The outlook for approving fibromyalgia claims for SSDI benefits has improved over time as more information has been gathered about the nature and underlying cause of this condition.

However, 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.



In summary, the SSDI claim adjudication process is a complex one, and the evaluation of pain levels can be especially subjective. SSDI applicants can improve the likelihood of receiving a favorable claim decision by keeping up with medical appointments and any recommended treatments and therapies.