

Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain

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Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain: The Basics

What are arthritis, joint pain, and back pain?

Arthritis, joint pain, and back pain are chronic conditions that cause significant difficulties for people at work and may force people to leave the workforce.

There are as many as 150 different forms of arthritis affecting people of all ages, including children. It is estimated that 1 in 5 Canadians are living with the condition. Other possible causes of joint and back pain include injury, repetitive strain, mechanical back pain, tendinitis, bursitis, fibromyalgia, and sarcoidosis, to name a few.

This website aims to help employers understand and support their employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain so that their employees can manage their condition and remain at work.

Arthritis, joint pain, and back pain and the workplace

Symptoms of arthritis, joint pain, and back pain vary across different conditions and among different people. Many people can carry out all their work duties without any limitations, especially when their condition is under control. For others, these conditions may slow career progression, require changes in employment to accommodate their condition, create concern about future employment, or force people give up work.

What can you do to help?

Your workplace can do a lot to help, and it doesn't have to be difficult. These steps can build a better workplace for everyone:

- Create understanding
- Increase education and awareness
- Be aware and open to accommodations
- Be pro-active

Read on for more detailed information on arthritis, joint pain, and back pain in the workplace:

Common Forms of Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects 1 in 100 Canadians. It is a painful, chronic, and usually progressive disease that occurs when the body's immune system starts attacking and damaging joints and soft tissues surrounding the bones. RA most commonly affects the small joints of the hands, feet, wrists, knees, and ankles. Some risk factors include smoking, obesity, and family history. People can develop RA at any age, including during childhood/early adulthood, but most are 40-60 years old.

The symptoms of RA can vary but generally include joint pain, stiffness, swelling, and fatigue. Symptoms (especially joint pain and stiffness) are worse after a period of immobility. This makes the mornings and prolonged sitting difficult. People with RA can also experience **flares** when their symptoms are much worse for a period of time, before returning to their baseline; they can also have periods where their symptoms cause few problems.

Flares are one of the particular challenges that people with arthritis face. They could be feeling fine one day and end up in the hospital the next day.

Flares involve intense pain and are often associated with extreme fatigue. The cause is unknown. It can be difficult for colleagues and managers to understand the unpredictable and debilitating nature of flares. They can make planning workloads challenging. Managing flares in the workplace requires close communication and understanding between employees and employers.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis, currently impacting more than 3.2 million Canadians – about 1 in 10 people. OA is often described as “wear-and-tear” arthritis, but this incorrectly describes the disease process. It is now recognized as an imbalance between cartilage breakdown and cartilage repair, where the body cannot keep up with repairing damaged joint tissues. Damage often occurs from prior injury, as a result of aging, or from excessive load on the joint. Many factors can contribute to OA; some include: age, weight, gender, occupation, history of injury or surgery, and genetics. The symptoms of OA can include enduring joint pain and stiffness, and loss of flexibility.

Other forms of arthritis:

- **Ankylosing spondylitis (AS)** affects 1 in 200 Canadians and primarily affects the spine. It can also affect other joints, tendons, and ligaments. Similar to other forms arthritis, symptoms can vary but generally include pain and stiffness in the lower back and hips. AS is often diagnosed when people are in their teens or early 20s but can be diagnosed as late as the early 40s.
- **Lupus** is an autoimmune disease that affects 10 times more women than men: that means around 1 in 1,000 women will be diagnosed with lupus. The disease involves the body's immune system attacking healthy tissue in various parts of the body. Tissues affected can include the skin, joints, muscles, kidneys, lungs, heart, blood cells, and brain. Common symptoms are fatigue, fever, skin lesions, and joint pain. While it can start at any age, it occurs in most people between the ages of 15 and 45.
- **Psoriatic arthritis** affects 30% of patients with psoriasis and causes swelling and pain in and around the joints, as well as a scaly rash on the skin. The joints most commonly affected are the wrists, knees, elbows, shoulders, ankles, fingers, and toes. Most people are diagnosed

between the ages of 20 and 50. Obesity and having a relative who has psoriatic arthritis are among the risk factors.

- **Gout** affects 1 in 30 people and is caused by a buildup of uric acid in the body. Symptoms generally include severe pain and swelling, and it often affects the big toe but can include any other joint in the body. It is nine times more likely to occur in men than in women. Red meat, seafood, and alcohol consumption can increase the risk of gout; people who are overweight are more likely to develop gout. It can occur at any time, but mostly affects people over the age of 40.
- **Juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA)** develops in children under the age of 16. It affects 1 in 250 children. JIA occurs when the body's immune system attacks healthy tissues in the body creating inflammation and damage. It most commonly affects the joints, but can also involve the eyes, or in severe cases, the heart or lungs. Some forms of JIA are more common in girls.

Back pain is experienced by as much as 80% of the adult population. People can experience back problems due to muscle strain or displacement of an intervertebral disc (i.e., a slipped disc). In many cases, back pain is a temporary condition. However, it can be a sign of a more chronic condition, for instance, many patients report back pain is one of the first signs of ankylosing spondylitis.

Joint pain can have many different causes. Although the origin of pain may be different, the shared symptoms of pain, inflammation, and functional limitation are common. There is potential for unique symptoms and impacts to present themselves and for people to experience the same symptoms differently.

It is important to be aware that people with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain may have other chronic conditions, for example heart disease or diabetes. It is also common for people newly diagnosed with arthritis to feel anxious, depressed, and feel loss and anger at their diagnosis.

Impact of Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain at Work

Arthritis, joint pain, and back pain can impact people at work in numerous ways, including:

- **Fatigue** may affect stamina, ability to concentrate and interact with other people, and resilience
- **Pain** may affect a person's ability to do certain tasks if the task requires using a joint that is inflamed
- **Problems with mobility and function** may create difficulties carrying out certain duties, e.g., reduced dexterity, flexibility, or strength
- **Increased pain and stiffness in the morning combined with immobility** may create difficulties commuting to and from work
- **Decreased cognitive capacity or concentration** may reduce work productivity
- **Feeling overwhelmed and anxious** about their diagnosis and how it might impact their future may affect people's well-being

People often don't tell their employers or co-workers they have arthritis, joint pain, or back pain because they are concerned it might affect their career trajectory. You could have employees with arthritis, joint pain, or back pain that no one knows about. Be aware that employees may be caring for family members with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain and experiencing stress. Therefore, providing information and resources about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain may have a wider benefit.

Act Now:

How to Help Employees with Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain

Where are you at?

Where you start depends on where you are at. The Employer Workplace Self-Assessment tool was designed to help you reflect on your knowledge about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain and think about what's happening in your workplace. It will help you understand your workplace, identify areas of strength and weakness, and possible next steps.

How did you do in the arthritis, joint pain, and back pain section of the self-assessment tool? Do you know much about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain? Did you know about the impact of arthritis on workers? Were you aware that it is the leading cause of work disability in Canada?

"I think it would be beneficial to have information available to my administrators about what exactly my condition is. I've disclosed it partially to them, but nobody knows what RA is. They always go, 'oh yeah, I have arthritis in whatever joint or I take Tylenol for that.' But to be able to have them understand it from a view that doesn't make us look totally incompetent or like we're not able to perform at our job. That would be huge."

– Employee with arthritis

What can you do?

Having arthritis, back pain, or another chronic condition does not change your employee's knowledge or skills. An understanding and supportive workplace can help employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain to remain at work for as long as possible. Here are some things that you can try in your workplace that may help you support your employees:

- **Be understanding.** Work with the employee to figure out what they need. No one wants to have a chronic illness and chances are if an employee comes to you because they have arthritis, joint pain, or back pain they've already been trying to manage it at work for a while. Employees want to be able to keep working. Being understanding that their arthritis is causing them stress can help your employees feel supported and better manage their condition so that they can stay at work. This can include being understanding that medical appointments may pull them away from work, or may include employees taking sick days to manage flare-ups.
- **Increase education and awareness.** Better awareness helps you and other coworkers understand what employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain are going through and the challenges they may be facing. It could even help an employee recognize symptoms of arthritis in themselves! Also, while an employee may not have arthritis, they may have a family member or a student who does, so the information can be useful to people in
- **Be aware and open to accommodations.** Accommodations are one of the biggest predictors of employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain being able to manage their condition at work. Accommodations range from small adjustments (e.g., allowing 5-minute micro breaks instead of one 15-minute break) to larger accommodations (e.g., ergonomics, changes to work hours or activities). Changes to the work area, tools used, the way work is done, organized breaks and rotation, flexible work hours, or the work environment (lighting, temperature) can help reduce the risk and impact of arthritis. *Check out the Accommodations section for more detail.*

- **Be pro-active.** Does your workplace culture support employees with chronic conditions to stay at work? Is there anything that you could do to help minimize the impact of arthritis, joint pain, and back pain on employees in the workplace? Being pro-active is important in managing health and wellness. It can help people stay in work and be productive for as long as they need to.
- **Frequent communication.** Having regular discussions with employees can help identify problems and solutions early. Be sure to set up conditions for open communication with your employees – *refer to the Accommodations and Communication sections for more detail.*
- **Access to occupational health services.** Having access to occupational health services and looking at job design would also help support people with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain. There may also be resources available in your community that can help employees with RA or OA, e.g., GLA:D program for OA, Living Well arthritis exercise program – *refer to the Accommodations section for more details.*

Employees can be pro-active in similar ways:

- Communicating potential risks in the workplace
- Being open to change
- Promoting wellness in the workplace
- Using the educational tools provided

For more information about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, and how they impact people at work, visit our online *Tools and Resources* for articles and links:
<http://makingitworkforemployers.ca/tools-and-resources/>