

# Communication with Employees with Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain

## This printable summary includes:

- Communication: The Basics
- Benefits of Effective Communication
- Act Now: Five Communication Moments

## Communication with Employees about Arthritis, Joint Pain, and Back Pain: The Basics

There are five “communication moments” relevant for employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain:

1. Disclosure
2. Requesting accommodations
3. Checking in
4. Privacy
5. Communicating with co-workers

Communication is about creating workplace well-being. Each of these communication moments is part of effective communication and can contribute to how supported employees feel in their workplace.

### Why is communication important?

Evidence shows that people who have early access to health and wellness supports tend to have a better trajectory and outcome than people who don't. Prevention and impact limitation strategies are important for both employees and employers – but where does *communication* fit in?

Communication is part of all points in the journey. We know that employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain have better work outcomes the earlier they can access available supports. We also know that supports can be diverse and include everything from formal and informal workplace accommodations, to simply feeling that employers and co-workers are providing a supportive culture. Enabling access to timely and appropriate support is vital, but how do we know that we are communicating the information that people need when they need it? Do we know what information they need (whether an employee, co-worker, manager, or leader/decision-maker)?

Reflecting on existing communication strategies in your organization, identifying what is great, what is good, and what *might* need a nudge in the right direction is how we recommend you get started on a high-quality communication strategy.

Work disability can occur early in the disease progression for employees with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) or other forms of inflammatory arthritis. Therefore, to prevent work disability or other work disruptions (e.g., increased sick time, absenteeism, presenteeism) **prevention needs to occur as early as possible.**

*18% of employees with RA leave work within 5 years of diagnosis, 27% within 10 years<sup>1</sup>.*

## Where to start?

The next section, Benefits of Effective Communication, provides advice on how to get started with a review of workplace communication and to make decisions about what to do next. It also provides guidance on key issues that we know are important to employees who have arthritis, joint pain, and back pain.

## Benefits of Effective Communication

There are multiple benefits to arthritis-related communication:

- **Awareness & understanding.** Specific communication about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain promotes awareness and understanding about well-being across the organization. This provides support for co-workers with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, and can help dispel misunderstandings. It also helps all employees recognize signs or symptoms in themselves. Many people dismiss joint or back pain as “just getting older” and may not take steps that could help alleviate the pain.
- **Cost savings.** If an employee with arthritis, joint pain, or back pain can be supported earlier, there is a higher likelihood that an intervention or accommodation could help avoid a costly medical leave. Research has found that early open communication can support employees and employers to find effective solutions that can help manage symptoms of arthritis.
- **Accessing resources.** Sharing knowledge about available resources promotes their use by all employees. Providing resources also encourages open, informed, and trustworthy workplace communication.
- **Wellness culture.** Clear communication from employers fosters open communication from employees and contributes to a culture of wellness.

*In the next section, we identify ways to take concrete action on communication.*

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<sup>1</sup> Lacaille, D. (2019, January 16). Arthritis and the workplace [Webinar]. In *WWDIP Webinars*. Retrieved from <https://www.wwdpi.org/Webinars/Pages/Webinar.aspx?wbID=234>

## Where to start with workplace communication

Have you completed the *MiW for Employers Workplace Self-Assessment Tool*? You can use the questions in this self-assessment to review your existing communication around health and wellness and then use the content in this section help you figure out where you want to be.

Figuring out where you want to be should be based on:

- what you are currently doing
- what is working and not working
- your employees' needs

For instance, let's say you completed the Workplace Self-Assessment Tool and considered the ways that you are currently communicating with your employees about health and wellness. You decide to ask your employees about what they know about workplace health and wellness and how they are getting that information. If they aren't aware of the information you have been sharing or don't think your communication methods are helpful (e.g., newsletter, information on intranet, posters), then you might want to look at your mechanism for communication and see if it is reaching the intended audience. Talk to your employees about what information is important to them and how they would like to learn about it.

## Act Now: Five Communication Moments

Here we talk about five specific areas of communication relevant for employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain. It is important to think about these areas when communicating with your workforce about health and wellness. It will also ensure you are prepared if an employee approaches you to talk about arthritis or another health condition.

### 1. Disclosure

Some people tell their employer as soon as they are diagnosed with arthritis, joint pain, or back pain; others prefer to wait until they need to say something. Whatever the circumstances, **for most people this is not an easy conversation**. It makes all the difference to have the support and understanding of an employer.

*30–50% of employees with RA do not disclose their arthritis to their employer<sup>1</sup>.*

Employees might not disclose their arthritis, joint pain, and back pain because they are afraid of the impact of disclosure on their career, people's perceptions, or feelings of futility:

- **Fear of job loss or slowed career progression.** Although employees cannot be fired because of a chronic condition, they may worry that they will be more likely to be included in lay-offs or not considered for a promotion.
- **Fear that they will be perceived differently.** People with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain may worry that they will be seen as less competent or more of a liability. They may worry about unconscious bias that employers, HR, or co-workers have about people with a chronic condition.
- **Feelings of futility.** Some employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain may think there is nothing their employers can do to help or they may be reluctant to accept help.

In addition to deciding if they want to disclose or not, employees also need to consider when, to whom, with whom the information can be shared, and how much information they want to disclose. Disclosure can also depend on factors such as the type of work they do or how much their condition affects their ability to do their job.

It takes courage for employees to disclose a health condition, particularly if it's an invisible disability like arthritis:

*“Even though I’m sure that if I went and made it clear what I was experiencing, some accommodation would be made, but it takes a lot of courage to do that, especially when rheumatoid arthritis isn’t something that’s widely known.”*

*– Maya, aged 17*

To ensure employees are comfortable disclosing their arthritis, here are some actions to take:

- **Be prepared for a disclosure.** Understand what your workplace processes are and how to protect both your and the employee’s rights. These details are covered in the privacy section.
- **Ensure the processes around disclosure are clear.** Ensuring employees know who to talk to and what the process looks like reduces stress around disclosure conversations.
- **Start having conversations about workplace wellness.** The more health-related challenges are talked about and accepted, the easier it will be for employees to feel comfortable coming forward with them.

The [Workplace Accommodation Question Guide](#) in the Tools and Resources section can help you before and during disclosure. This question guide is helpful for employers, and can also be shared with employees to help them feel prepared and confident when going into these conversations.

## 2. Requesting accommodations

Having communication tools around accommodations supports both you and your employee when identifying and implementing accommodations.

For employees who do not want their co-workers to know about their health issues, careful thought needs to be put into how the accommodation will be addressed and presented.

See the Accommodations section for more information about adjustments or accommodations and the Tools and Resources section for more information about tools and resources around requesting accommodations.

**Remember to focus on what the employee can do and not just what they can’t.**

### 3. Checking in

Regular communication and check-ins provide opportunities to evaluate and discuss the appropriateness of an accommodation. **Scheduling a series of review meetings** makes time and space available and allows discussion about how the employee is doing, including if any further adjustments need to be made. **Using open questions** such as “How are you doing at the moment?” or “Is there anything that we could do to help?” can assist the employee in expressing concerns.

#### Tips for checking in:

- Ask your employee how they would like you to check in.
- See if they would like to schedule a series of review meetings to verify if the supports in place are working or if there are other adjustments they might need. In these meetings, you may also want to include an occupational therapist or other appropriate people.
- Let the employee know who they can talk to if their situation changes.

### 4. Privacy

As an employer, it is very important to respect your employees’ privacy. This includes if, when, and how you discuss their condition or accommodation with others.

Two key legal points related to communication and arthritis are **disclosure** and **privacy**. Here are the basics:

- If it does not interfere with workplace safety, an employee doesn’t have to disclose a health condition to you.
- If an employee has requested an accommodation, they are required to share the limitation or restriction they are experiencing, but do not need to disclose what their illness or disability is.

Legally, you can ask an employee about their functional limitations and their prognosis (a doctor’s opinion about how the condition can change over time). The information provided does not need to include the medical condition, and special care should be taken to protect the privacy of the employee.

**For example:** An employee with arthritis has pain and stiffness from sitting all day. Conversations with their doctor and occupational therapist recommend a sit-stand desk. When requesting the sit-stand desk, the employee reports that their limitation is sitting for long periods of time. They justify asking for the sit-stand desk because it will support their ability to perform their duties by limiting the amount of time they have to spend sitting.

### 5. Communicating with co-workers

Check with the employee before talking about their health to others, and make sure that any communications are only going to those who need to know. **It is your responsibility to protect your employee’s privacy and confidentiality.**

**For example,** when an employee tells you they have rheumatoid arthritis, they may want to tell their co-workers or to keep this information confidential. If they want to tell their co-workers, discuss and jointly agree about the best way to do this, including who will be told, when and how, what will be disclosed, and why (e.g., requesting accommodations).

### **Employee Role**

While an employer is responsible for enabling the five “communication moments,” employees can also take an active responsibility in the workplace. Employees have key parts to play in disclosure, requesting accommodations, checking in, privacy, and communicating with co-workers.

Once employees have received or sought out information from their employer, they will make decisions about what to do next. If a condition presents a health and safety risk for the employee or others, they have a duty to disclose. Employees are responsible for communicating their needs.

The Employee Resource section includes resources that you can share with your employees to help them understand the different roles and responsibilities.

### **Did you know?**

*Employees say that a key barrier to requesting accommodations is not fear of the employer but fear of how their colleagues will respond.*

**For more information about communication and why it is important for employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, visit our online *Tools and Resources* for articles and links: <http://makingitworkforemployers.ca/tools-and-resources/>**