

TRANSCRIPT:

Arthritis in the Workplace: Supporting Employees

Podcast Host:

I'm Lisa Brandt and you are listening to the Joint Matters at Work Podcast, Supporting Employees with Arthritis in the Workplace. We'll be talking about the prevalence of arthritis and its potential impact on the workplace, the benefits of providing accommodations to employees with arthritis, as well as possible solutions you can put in place to address employees' needs.

Did you know that arthritis is the most prevalent chronic health condition in Canada¹? Arthritis can affect anyone at any time, including adults, children and teens. Over six million Canadians are living with arthritis, including over 2.5 million people in Ontario alone, and more than half are under the age of 65.² This means that arthritis is a reality in almost every workplace. Let's hear from Dr. Arif Jetha, workplace expert, on the impact of arthritis in the workplace, and Annette McKinnon, a person living with arthritis, about ways that employers can support their staff. Dr. Jetha, what do you think is important for employers to know about arthritis and its prevalence in the workplace?

Dr. Arif Jetha, Workplace Expert:

While chronic conditions in the workplace are common, there can be a disconnect in awareness. A 2018 study showed that while 58% of Canadians reported living with one or more chronic conditions, including arthritis, employers estimated this number to be at just 29%.³ That's an awareness gap of almost 30%.

¹ 2015 Canadian Community Health Survey

² <https://www.arthritis.ca/about-arthritis/what-is-arthritis/the-truth-about-arthritis>

³ <http://www.sanofi.ca/l/ca/en/download.jsp?file=EE7860A3-5A94-4E83-8126-14012BB0E6C8.pdf>

<https://www.sunlife.ca/static/canada/Sponsor/About%20Group%20Benefits/Group%20benefits%20products%20and%20services/The%20Conversation/Bright%20Papers/files/GB10267-E.pdf>

Musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis are currently the second-highest cause of short- and long-term disability claims in Canada⁴, second only to mental illness, but they don't have to be. With increased awareness, as well as proactive and responsive measures, employers can ensure that staff with arthritis are set up for success.

There are more than 100 different kinds of arthritis, with a range of symptoms and impacts. In general, though, the condition is associated with painful inflammation and stiffness in the joints, which can make it more difficult to move and can cause fatigue.

Since arthritis is a chronic episodic condition, it doesn't necessarily affect a person the same way all the time. Rather, it can flare up and then settle down again. Many people can deal with their arthritis symptoms in their day-to-day lives, with little or no impact on their workday. Others may benefit from support in the workplace, so they can better manage their condition to stay healthy and productive.

Research shows that people living with arthritis value their jobs highly. Work can be a central part of a person's identity and provides purpose, social interaction, and in some cases, opportunities for physical activity, which can help to minimize symptoms.⁵ That means that people with arthritis are highly motivated to protect their work lives and remain working. They often make changes to their personal lives like reducing the time they spend in leisure or other activities to stay healthy and keep working.

As an employer, it's helpful for you to know that accommodations and solutions are available if they're needed, to keep your team working well and efficiently. Most accommodations cost very little or nothing at all, providing a high return on investment.

Not every employee with arthritis may tell you about their condition. Additionally, an employee doesn't need to disclose a specific diagnosis to request an accommodation. Still, there are several steps employers can take to have a healthy and inclusive workplace for all employees. These steps typically cost very little or nothing at all. The Job Accommodation Network's 2018 report, *Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact*, found that

⁴ Reinsurance Group of America (RGA), 12th biennial Group Disability Claims Benchmarking Survey (2017) - https://www.rgare.com/docs/default-source/infographics/disability-claims-infographic-final.pdf?sfvrsn=1e00a588_2

⁵ J Occup Rehabil 2013 study: Striking a Balance: Work-Health-Personal Life

in a survey of 2,387 employers, “a high percentage of accommodations (59%) cost absolutely nothing to make,” and that providing accommodations resulted in benefits such as “retaining valuable employees, improving productivity and morale, reducing workers’ compensation and training costs, and improving company diversity.”⁶ Talk about a win for everyone!⁷

Podcast Host:

Thank you, Dr. Jetha, for those insights. Let’s take a closer look at some examples of workplace accommodations with Annette McKinnon, a patient advocate living with arthritis. Annette, what are some of the ways that employers can help employees with arthritis stay active in their roles?

Annette McKinnon, Patient Advocate:

One way to support employees with arthritis is through flex time. Flex time can be helpful to people with arthritis because it lets employees vary their work schedule while still completing their required number of weekly hours. For example, if a worker has a medical appointment or didn’t sleep well the night before, they can shift their start and end time for that day from 9-5 to 11-7 instead or make up hours from home on a Saturday. Or, the employer and the employee could agree on a modified break schedule—for example, taking shorter but more frequent breaks, such as taking three 10-minute breaks instead of a full 30-minute break.

Work-from-home arrangements, also known as telecommuting or telework, may be another option, depending on the kind of work the employee does. Commuting can sometimes make arthritis pain and fatigue worse. Working from home part of the time may help workers sustain their energy and health. Both the employee and employer would agree on a schedule and ways to communicate with other staff members.

These are just a few examples of some of the ways to accommodate employees with arthritis at little or no cost to the organization. The goal is to keep people active in their roles, which can often be achieved with minor adjustments.

Podcast Host:

Thank you, Annette. Dr. Jetha, how effective are accommodations for arthritis in the workplace? What impact are workers and their employers noticing?

⁶ <https://askjan.org/topics/costs.cfm>

⁷ <https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/flexible.html>

Dr. Jetha, Workplace Expert:

Numerous studies have indicated the effectiveness of workplace accommodations for maintaining employee productivity and improving workplace outcomes. For example, a 2015 study on *Availability, Need For and Use of Work Accommodations and Benefits* found that amongst 219 Canadian employees with various forms of arthritis, workers who needed and received accommodations had similar work outcomes to employees who didn't require accommodations. And, they had better outcomes than employees who needed, but didn't use, accommodations, including fewer job disruptions and less likelihood of reducing work hours.

An earlier study from 2009, entitled *Should I tell my employer and coworkers I have arthritis?*" also found that employees with arthritis who felt supported by colleagues and/or management in their workplace had much better outcomes on the job as well as less workplace stress.⁸ By creating working conditions and an organizational culture that is supportive of employees with arthritis, you are setting up your whole organization for success, not just individuals. Annette, do you have any additional suggestions for employers?

Annette, Patient Advocate:

Yes, thank you. Ensuring employee success also means providing the right equipment for your staff. Consider an ergonomic assessment, done either by a consultant or a qualified in-house employee. An assessment can provide an analysis of the work environment and make appropriate recommendations.⁹ There is more information and resources about ergonomics and musculoskeletal disorders such as arthritis available on the Government of Ontario's website, at www.ontario.ca/MSD.

Recommendations from an ergonomics assessment might include something like a properly set-up ergonomic chair and keyboard to achieve good posture and a reduction in joint pain and stiffness. Workstations that can be adjusted for height are also helpful.

Anti-fatigue mats can be used for people who stand for long periods of time on hard surfaces. For phone use, hands-free headsets are more comfortable to use than a receiver and again, help people maintain good posture.

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/art.24889>

⁹ <https://askjan.org/solutions/Ergonomic-Assessments.cfm>

There are lots of devices that work especially well for people with arthritis, and they can apply to a variety of job environments. These devices help to protect and stabilize joints in the body. Some examples include:

- pens with oversized or cushioned grips
- assist-lift cushions, to help people get up to a standing position
- a phone with larger push buttons, or
- a key extender or holder, with a wide base to hold the key¹⁰

Podcast Host:

Thanks, Annette, for those suggestions.

As an employer and a leader, a large part of your role involves fostering an environment where your employees can do their work and do it well. Continuing to invest in all your employees is a smart business decision that pays off for everyone.

For more information about the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and your obligations as an employer, visit the accessible workplaces page on the Government of Ontario's website at Ontario.ca. If you haven't listened to the other episodes in our Joint Matters at Work podcast series, be sure to check them out on the Arthritis Society website at arthritis.ca.

Music

¹⁰ <https://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/pain-management/joint-protection/arthritis-devices.php>