



# ARTHRITIS AND WORK

Work is a significant part of life, both practically — it makes it possible for us to provide for ourselves — and personally — it can furnish us with a sense of accomplishment, competency and satisfaction.

Since we spend a significant part of our lives working, it's important to know how to protect your joints and navigate the issues that can arise when you live with arthritis.

This is what Arthritis and Work is all about. Whatever kind of work you do, be it paid or unpaid, full time or occasional, physically demanding or more sedentary, this information is for you. We encourage you to dive in and find what's relevant to you.

## WORK AND ARTHRITIS

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## SURVEY AND EMAIL SIGNUP



## THE CHALLENGES – BY THE NUMBERS

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### Arthritis is Canada's most prevalent chronic health condition.

It affects more than 6 million Canadians over the age of 15. It's a common misconception that arthritis primarily affects only the elderly. In fact, 56 per cent of people with arthritis are under the age of 65 and in their prime working years.

#### FACTS

- When not well controlled, arthritis can prevent us from working and is one of the top causes of long-term disability in Canada.  
[Source: Life with Arthritis in Canada – Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010](#)
- Working-aged Canadians with arthritis are twice as likely to report not being in the workforce compared to those without arthritis (52% vs. 25%), highlighting an increased need for support for starting and staying in work.

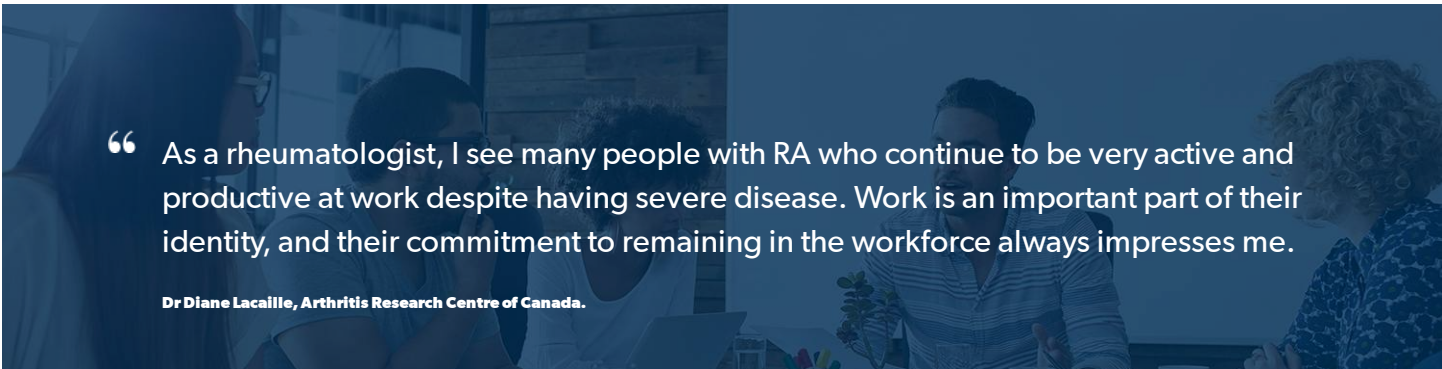
#### Those who are working report significant challenges:

- 41 per cent of employed Canadians with arthritis indicate that arthritis makes it difficult to carry out their work responsibilities
- Over one-third report that arthritis makes it difficult to travel to and from work
- Over one-third believe that their condition has affected their career development

**According to a 2011 survey of osteoarthritis patients:**

- 35 per cent of working Canadians with osteoarthritis have taken sick days because of pain
- 19 per cent have reduced their work hours
- 14 per cent have taken a short-term disability leave from work
- 80 per cent have indicated that osteoarthritis affects their ability to perform their job

Whether or not your condition currently has a significant impact on your employment, taking steps to protect your joints at work and to seek the support you need can help you stay healthy and productive.



“ As a rheumatologist, I see many people with RA who continue to be very active and productive at work despite having severe disease. Work is an important part of their identity, and their commitment to remaining in the workforce always impresses me.

**Dr Diane Lacaille, Arthritis Research Centre of Canada.**





## WE WANT TO WORK

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We've seen that the challenges to stay on the job are significant, but most people with arthritis want to work. In the 2013 study *Fit for Work* prepared for the Arthritis Society, it was found that over 65 per cent of individuals with arthritis go to work even when they feel unwell.

The truth is that unfortunately individuals can find it difficult to tell others about their arthritis or to ask for support to do their jobs. In the *Fit for Work* study, nearly half of individuals with arthritis had not told their supervisor about their arthritis and fewer than one in five workers with arthritis had discussed options to

better manage working with arthritis.

Source: [The Arthritis Society "Fit for Work" Study: Findings, Challenges for the Future and Implications for Action, 2013](#)

“ People tell us that work is good for their health when they have arthritis, because they're doing something interactive and not at home focusing on the pain, so people are very motivated to remain working.

**Dr. Monique Gignac, Institute for Work and Health**



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## COMMON FEARS AND EXPERIENCES

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Beyond physical symptoms, people with arthritis may also experience additional challenges that can make it more difficult for them to cope with and discuss arthritis at work. Here are some common interpersonal and emotional challenges that people with arthritis may face in the workplace:

- Feelings of isolation, stress, guilt, despair and helplessness
- Feeling that nothing can be done to improve the situation

- Not wanting to be thought of as a poor worker especially when the job is physical
- Pushing themselves too hard because they want to be a team player
- Fearing people will think they lack motivation or interest when they are unable to do a task
- Feeling that chances for advancement might disappear because of the limitations others think they have
- Fearing arthritis might be seen as too costly to the organization or their department
- Feeling that irritability resulting from pain may hurt relationships with co-workers
- Fearing that because symptoms are episodic and they can sometimes do tasks that they can't during a flare-up, co-workers might think they're faking it
- Wanting to wait until their symptoms are severe before seeking help for fear of looking sick
- Fear that necessary accommodations like flexible work hours might be resented as "special treatment"
- Using all their energy for work and having nothing left for family and friends
- Worrying that their health information won't be kept private
- Fearing they might be discriminated against or lose their job

Sources:

[Dr Diane Lacaille et al. - "Problems faced at work due to inflammatory arthritis"](#)

[Robert D Wilton, Disability Disclosure in the Workplace, Just Labour, 2014](#)

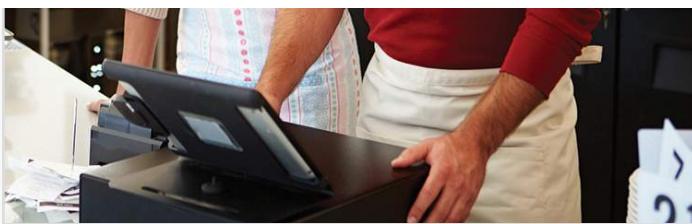
CLICK ON THE PHOTOS BELOW



**"Telling my employees was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I was a former athlete and superwoman."**

- A.C., small business owner





“I don’t ask for help easily either, which isn’t a good thing. Some of my co-workers were resentful of my special arrangement because they couldn’t ‘see’ my illness.”

- Rosie lives with RA and OA



## TOP STRATEGIES

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There's no one-size-fits-all solution to challenges faced at work, as there are so many different kinds of jobs. Nevertheless, here are some proven strategies for dealing with arthritis at work.

### **Determine a realistic treatment plan**

Your treatment plan needs to take your work life into account, or you won't be able to commit to it fully. For example, if you have a desk job but find that regular physical activity helps you cope with arthritis symptoms, then you need to build plans for exercise or stretches into your workday.

### Talk to an expert

There are often workarounds for workplace conditions that can tend to worsen joint pain. Your healthcare team can help you figure out how to: sit at a desk properly, adjust your vehicle seat, get in and out of your vehicle, change your body position if you stand for long periods, position a workstation height for different tasks, choose the right shoes, lift heavy objects safely, or perform other work-related tasks.

### Be a planner

You can include self-care at work without disrupting your day. Some real-life examples include setting a timer to remember to change positions or stretch, using the speakerphone or headsets for calls when possible so you can do hand or foot exercises, using an ice pack or doing simple stretches on your break, or alternating tougher tasks with easier ones.

**SAMPLE ACTIVITY CHART** Try planning your next few weeks and review your progress as you go.

DATE:	MORNING (midnight to noon)											AFTERNOON/EVENING (noon to midnight)												
	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Monday																								
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### Evaluate your energy

Try using an [activity diary](#) to track your energy levels throughout the day. After a week, you can see if there are better ways to organize your tasks and pinpoint areas that need attention (for example, if you put all of your energy into work and have nothing left for time with family and friends, or if you really thrive in the afternoons, but have difficulty in the mornings.)

### Try a tool

There are lots of different tools that can make it easier and safer for you to protect your joints when performing everyday tasks. For example, key extenders, a rolling suitcase, a pen grip, anti-fatigue mats, hand splints, knee braces, an elastic band wrapped around a doorknob...these are just a few of the things you might find helpful.

For more information about helpful tools and hacks, check out the Tools section of Daily Living.

LET'S GO!

### Consider speaking up

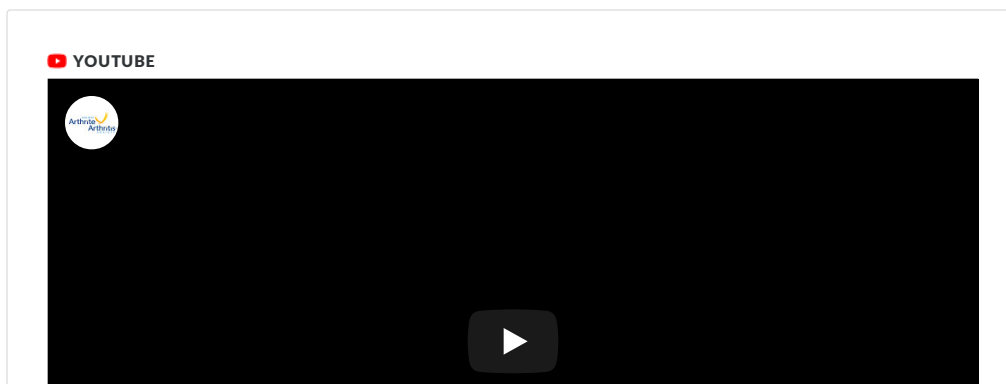
Talking about arthritis at work can be scary — many people are understandably concerned about being seen as unable to do their jobs or being resented by co-workers. On the other hand, if you are having trouble and your employer and colleagues don't know why, or if your health is affected by your work environment, discussing your condition might help improve the situation.

[Source: Society – Flourish – Workplace 2017](#)

The section DISCLOSING YOUR CONDITION will provide you with guidance on how to talk about your arthritis at work.

LET'S GO!

## Resources





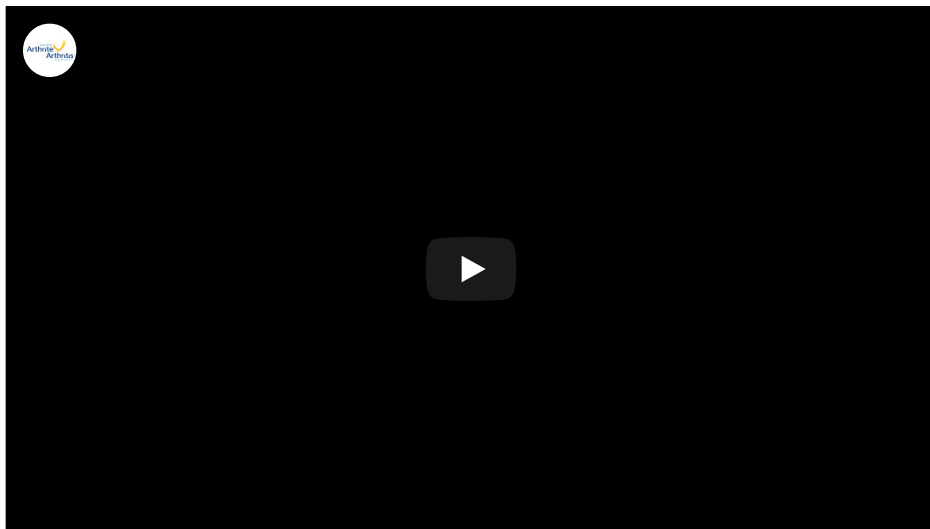


### **Joint Matters at Work - What is Arthritis?**

Ken Calder lives with ankylosing spondylitis. Let him explain what is Arthritis and its symptoms. With this presentation, you will learn how to cope with the disease and learn about possible solutions to manage it at work.

**VIEW ON YOUTUBE >**

 YOUTUBE



### **Joint Matters at Work - Prevent joint pain at work**

With physical therapist Karen Meyer, learn how to improve your joint health at work and what habits you can change to prevent any joint problems.

**VIEW ON YOUTUBE >**



## THE FOUR PS

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If you've read our [Overcoming Fatigue](#) module this information may be familiar. The four Ps – planning, prioritizing, pacing and problem-solving – are vital skills to develop. They'll be useful in every part of your life.

### SAMPLE ACTIVITY CHART Try planning your next few weeks and review your progress as you go.

DATE:	MORNING (midnight to noon)											AFTERNOON/EVENING (noon to midnight)												
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## PLANNING

Make a list of the tasks you need to complete when your energy level is at its highest. If you have difficulty pinpointing exactly where all your energy is going, try using our [Activity Diary](#).

“ I’m a therapist and some days when I’m working on my clients, I have to pivot in a certain way and putting that excess stress on the knee I find can be difficult. I break it up; I schedule some extra time in between clients. Also ice packs are a great friend.

**Shirley, works full time and lives with osteoarthritis**

## PRIORITIZING

Rank the tasks you need to do in order of importance and decide what task you can remove, delay or hand over to someone else. Also, learn to say no in a respectful way so you can avoid the fatigue that stops you from doing the things you really want to.



My arthritis encouraged me to prioritize the importance of my work to ensure I had the major tasks finished before less critical jobs.

Devin, works full time and lives with inflammatory arthritis

## PACING

Learning to pace yourself to save your energy will help you feel more relaxed, focused, and in control.

Break your activities down into achievable parts and spread them throughout the day or week. When doing an activity, take short, regular breaks. Change your position and activity often. Don't wait until you are very tired as a guide for when to stop doing something. Plan ahead to change your activity or to rest before you start to feel tired.



"Working smarter by anticipating periods of fatigue and tackling intense tasks earlier in the day were other ways employees with arthritis could better handle their jobs. Some set an alarm clock to remind them to get up and move around to avoid stiffness. Some worked a 9.5- or 10-hour day but took frequent breaks, or they had colleagues cover for them so they could come in a little later. A lot of these types of examples don't cost a lot of money."

- Dr. Monique Gignac, Institute for Work and Health



"When I know I have something that will require me to be concentrating at my desk for a few hours, I set a timer on my computer for every hour to make sure I get up, move and stretch."

- Anne, living with inflammatory arthritis



"I am self-employed. During the afternoon when typically I experience exhaustion, I am able to take a half-hour nap allowing me to work longer in the day."

- Davina, living with inflammatory arthritis

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## PROBLEM-SOLVING

Sometimes it's not what you do but the way you do it that makes a difference. Look at your daily routine. Start to notice if you spend all morning doing the same type of repetitive tasks, or if your working position causes you pain or discomfort. Perhaps your body complains when you have to perform certain tasks, or you get very tired by the afternoon. If something you are doing is causing a problem, ask yourself if you can do it differently.

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“There are a lot of assistive devices out there that can help make tasks easier. I often tell clients that if there is something they are having difficulty doing, someone probably has invented something to make it easier. Thinking outside the box, exploring other options or seeking out devices to help can really decrease stress on joints and lessen the energy tasks take.”

- Amanda, Occupational Therapist with extensive experience in arthritis management

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“Whenever possible I use the speaker phone for calls. Then I will do some hand and foot exercises (and whatever else I can manage).”

- Kate, living with inflammatory arthritis

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“I kind of have a psychological sense of when the pain going to come on bad. I work for my family business in fruits and veggies. So what happens is, when the truck comes in there is usually at least two guys unloading and stacking in the back with me. And when I know the pain's going to come, I get extra people to help.”

- Marcus works full time and lives with osteoarthritis

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## YOUR BODY AT WORK

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Properly assessing and modifying your work set up as needed can help you to work more safely and efficiently, and at the same time minimize your joint pain and reduce limitations. Some employers offer work station ergonomic assessments. If your workplace has a Human Resources department, check with them to see if a work station assessment is available to you. You can also follow the tips below to help create a work set up that reduces strain on your joints.

Source: The Arthritis Society, Don't Let Arthritis Boss You Around

Some of the most common at-work issues faced by people with arthritis are sitting, using a computer, standing, lifting and driving.



## SEATED WORK

A common misconception is that sitting is easy on the body, but it is in fact especially difficult if you have to do it for long periods of time. Good posture is key to staying on top of pain, but remember, staying in one position without breaks is taxing on your body, no matter how good your posture is. Keep moving.

Here are some tips to maintain good posture while you are sitting:

**CHAIR:** When most of your work is done seated, find or request a comfortable chair that supports your lower and mid-back (with the backrest in the small of your back), as well as your thighs and buttocks. If the lumbar (lower back) support is inadequate, use a small rolled towel.



**WORK SURFACE:** Make sure your chair is at a comfortable distance from the computer, cash register or any other item that you will use often. Reaching strains your muscles and joints. Use a telephone headset to reduce the amount of neck side bending required to hold the phone receiver.





**SHOULDERS:** Sit upright with square shoulders. Your shoulders should be relaxed but not slumped. Hold your shoulders in the same position when you're sitting as you would when you're standing. Your hips and knees should be at 90 degrees.

**HEIGHT:** Adjust the height of your chair if necessary so your feet are flat on the floor – you don't want them dangling. If you can't lower your seat, use a footrest. (Tip: Use one or two packages of printer paper wrapped in tape.) Your hips should be slightly higher than your knees.

**TILT:** The chair seat should be level or sloping slightly upwards at the front — never downwards.

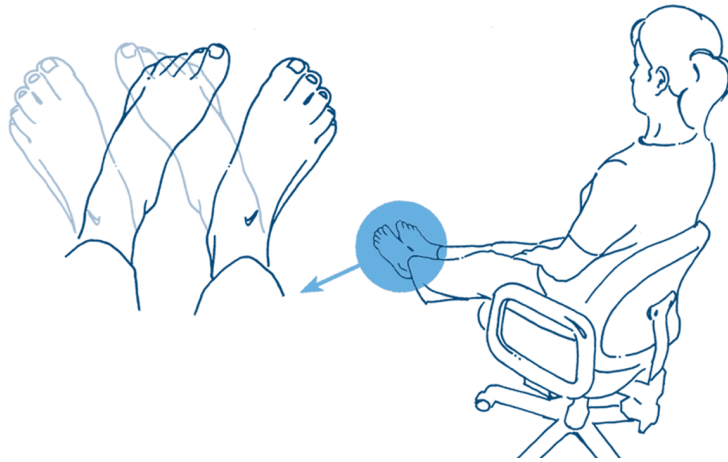
**ARMRESTS:** Check that your armrests are at the right height — if you have to hunch your shoulders then the armrests are too high, but if your elbows don't reach then they're too low. Some people find that removing the armrests altogether can make a chair more comfortable.

**REPOSITION:** Change your body position often. Stand up or stretch if you have been sitting for a long time, or slightly adjust the tilt of your chair towards the back for a while. If you need to, use a timer to remind yourself to switch positions.

**STRETCH & ACTIVATE YOUR JOINTS:** When you move your body, you feed your joints. Your cartilage depends on joint movement to absorb nutrients and remove waste. Cartilage, ligaments and bone also become stronger and more resilient with regular use. There are lots of simple stretches and exercises you can do even while remaining at your desk.

## **TOP TEN EXERCISES YOU CAN DO AT WORK**

## Ankle circles



Sit upright in a chair with feet stretched out in front. Rotate feet in one direction. Repeat in opposite direction

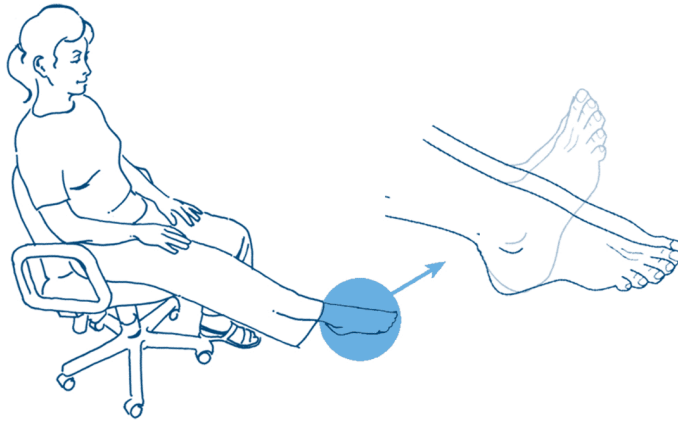
**Heel/toe lift**

Sit forward on a chair with feet flat. Lift heels, keeping toes on the floor, then lift toes. Hold for three seconds then return feet to flat position.

## Knee raises

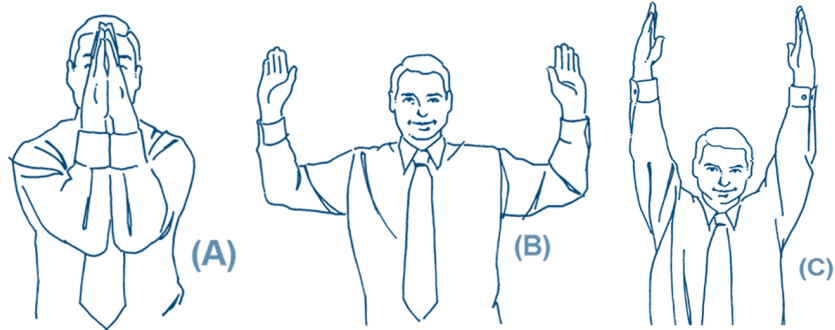


Sit on the edge of a chair or stool with your back straight. Lift your knee as high as you can without bending your back. You can help get your knee higher with your hands if necessary. Keeping your abdominal muscles tight, slowly lower your leg back to the starting position. Anyone who has just had total hip replacement should wait three months before attempting this exercise.

**Leg lift with ankle movements**

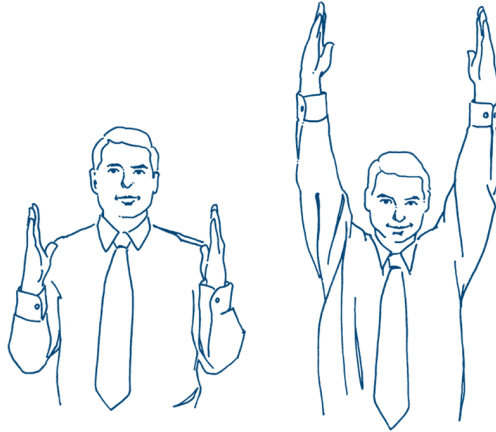
Sit upright with your back supported. Slowly straighten your knee. With the knee slightly bent, bend your ankle to point the toes straight ahead. Then reverse to point your toes toward the ceiling. Repeat.

## Shoulder stretches



Sit or stand with forearms pressed together in front of your body. Then, bring your elbows back to the “hands up” position, with palms facing forward. Finally, stretch arms overhead as far as possible, keeping your elbows in line with the side of your body.

## Forward arm reaches



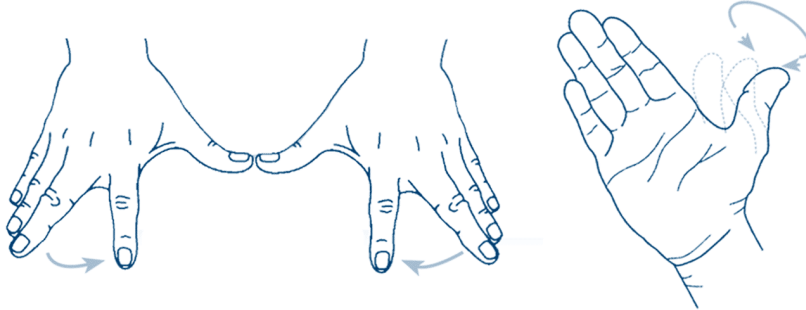
Sit or stand with arms at your side, elbows bent and thumbs pointed back toward your shoulders. Stretch arms overhead. If one of your arms is weak, you can help it by placing your hand under the elbow and assisting the arm to the overhead position. Finally, lower arms slowly to the start position.



**Shoulder squeeze and wrist stretch**

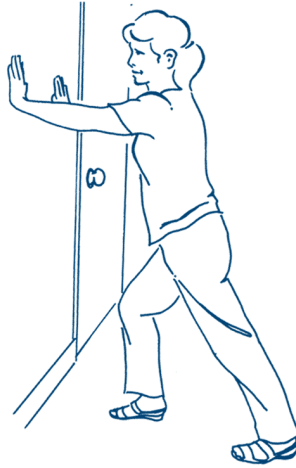
Put your palms and fingers together. Hold your arms stretched out together in front. Pull your hands in toward your chest, making your elbows bend to each side. Press palms together as you move them closer to your body and squeeze shoulder blades together.

## Finger walk and thumb circles



Sit with your hands on a table or desk, fingers pointing ahead. Slide your thumbs toward each other. Then slide each finger one at a time toward the thumb. After the little finger has completed the “walk”, lift your hands and put them down straight. Then, move your fingers toward the thumb.

## Hip and calf stretch



Stand with arms supporting you against a wall. Place one foot in front of the other and keep your feet apart (shoulder-width) and pointing forward. Keep your shoulder, hip, knee and ankle in a straight line. Keep shoulder and hips square and tighten your abdominal muscles. Move forward, bending only at the ankles and keeping weight on the heel of your back foot.

# Walking



Take a walk every day. Walking allows you to stretch your back and leg muscles, as well as other joints that can become stiff from sitting.

## TOP 10 EXERCISES

All exercises should be performed 20 times or as tolerated

### 1 Ankle Circles

- Sit upright, keep abdominal muscles tight, chest high with legs stretched out in front
- Slowly circle your feet in one direction 20 times, then in the other direction 20 times (If you have difficulty try using one leg at a time)



### 2 Heel/Toe Lift

- Sit upright on the edge of a chair or stool with your feet flat on the floor
- Lift heels for three seconds, keeping toes on the floor
- Return feet to flat position then lift toes for three seconds



### 3 Knee Raises

- Sit upright on the edge of a chair or stool
- Keeping abdominal muscles tight, lift one knee as high as you can without bending your back (You can assist lifting your knee higher with your hands)
- Slowly lower your foot down to the floor

**(Note: Avoid this exercise if you've had a total hip replacement)**



### 4 Leg Lift with Ankle Movements

- Sit upright, keeping abdominal muscles tight and back supported, then slowly straighten your knee
- With the knee slightly bent, point your toes straight ahead, then reverse to point toes toward the ceiling
- Lower leg
- Repeat with other leg



### 5 Shoulder Stretches

- Sit or stand with good posture, forearms close together in front of the body **(Note: This start position is not suitable for those with osteoporosis)**
- Open arms at shoulder height, elbows bent and palms facing forward, squeezing shoulder blades together
- Stretch arms overhead, keeping elbows out in line with body



### 6 Forward Arm Reaches

- Sit or stand upright with arms at your side, elbows bent and thumbs pointing back toward your shoulders
- Stretch arms overhead
- If one of your arms is weak, you can help it by placing your hand under the elbow and assist the weak arm to the overhead position
- Lower arms slowly to the start position



### 7 Shoulder Squeeze & Wrist Stretch

- Put palms and fingers together
- Hold arms stretched out together in front of your body
- Pull hands in towards your chest, making your elbows point outwards to each side
- Press palms together as you move them closer to your body and squeeze shoulder blades together



### 8 Hip & Calf Stretch

- Stand upright, keep abdominal muscles tight with arms outstretched and hands against a wall, elbows straight and feet hip-width apart
- Keep shoulders and hips in a straight line as you place one leg behind you
- Bend the knee of the front foot keeping heel of the back foot on the floor to feel the stretch in the calf on the back of the leg
- Hold for 10 to 20 seconds, breathing deeply
- Alternate legs **(Note: If you cannot keep your heel on the floor bring your back foot forward more)**



### 9 Finger Walk & Thumb Circles

- Sit with hands on table, fingers pointing forward
- Slide thumbs toward each other
- Slide each finger one at a time towards the thumb
- After the little finger has completed the "walk", lift your hands and put them down straight
- Move the thumb in a large circle in each direction



### 10 Walking

- Take a walk every day; walking allows you to stretch your back and leg muscles and helps joints from becoming stiff due to inactivity
- Pay attention to good posture; stand tall, chest high and keep abdominal muscles tight

[arthritis.ca](http://arthritis.ca)



**Arthritis Society**  
Arthritis. Give before it takes.

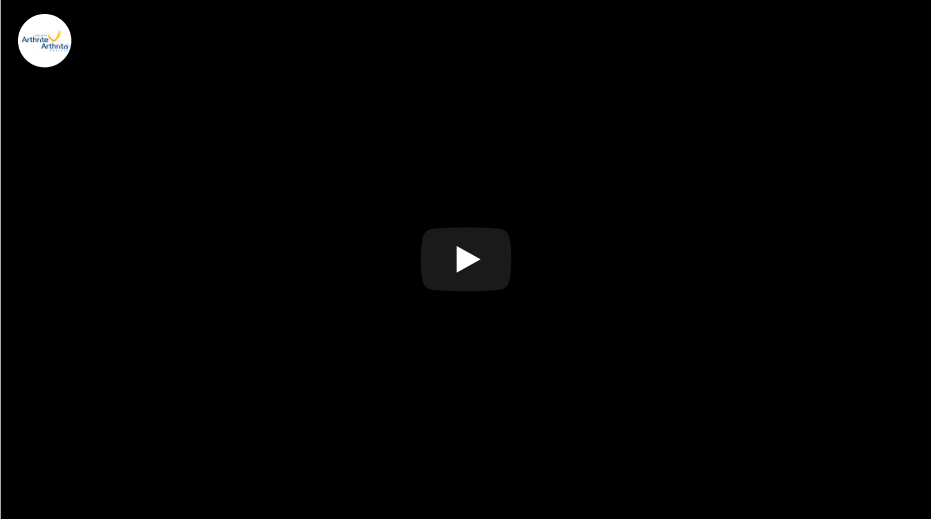

Download the [Top 10 Exercises](#) and post them at your desk to remind you to keep moving.

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### More Exercises for The Workplace

People who work at their desks all day tend to stay in one position for a long time. The exercises in these videos are designed to counter the effects of sitting at your desk.

 YOUTUBE




**The Arthritis Society - Joint Matters - Stretches for the Workplace**

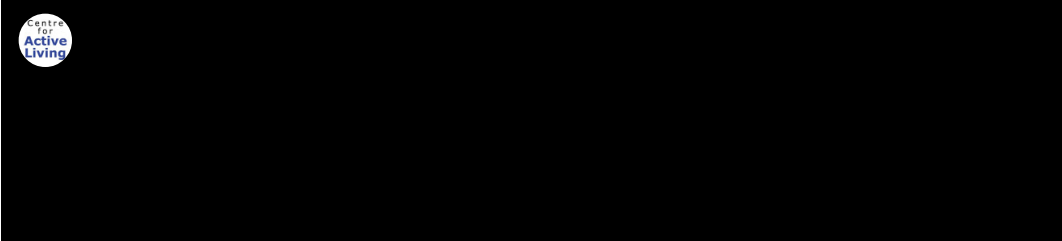

Do these simple stretches to keep you moving and feeling good at work

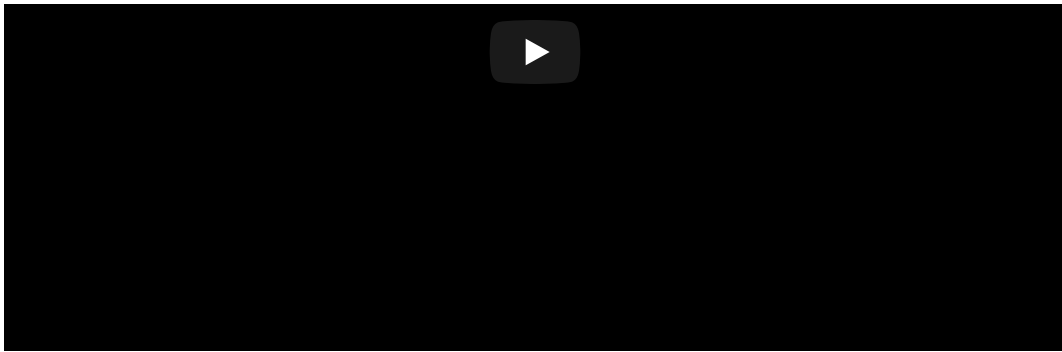
[VIEW ON YOUTUBE >](#)

These videos from the [Alberta Centre for Active Living](#) show you how you can do yoga at your desk.

<b>PART 1</b>	<b>PART 2</b>	<b>PART 3</b>
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 YOUTUBE





## **Yoga @ Your Desk - Part 1: Introducing the Exercises**

People who work at their desks all day tend to stay in one position for a long time. The exercises in these videos are designed to counter the effects of sitting at your desk. We suggest that you start with Part 1 and then move on to Parts 2 and 3.

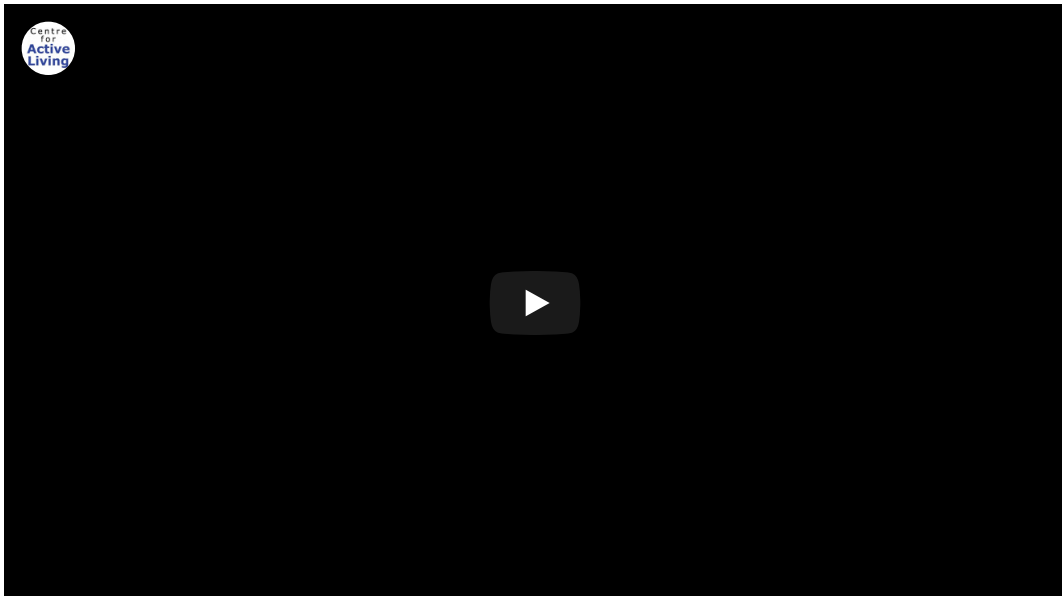
**VIEW ON YOUTUBE >**

**PART 1**

**PART 2**

**PART 3**

**YOUTUBE**



## **Yoga @ Your Desk - Part 2a: Linking the Exercises to Your Breath**

People who work at their desks all day tend to stay in one position for a long time. The exercises in these videos are designed to counter the effects of sitting at your desk. We suggest that you start with Part 1 and then move on to Parts 2 and 3.

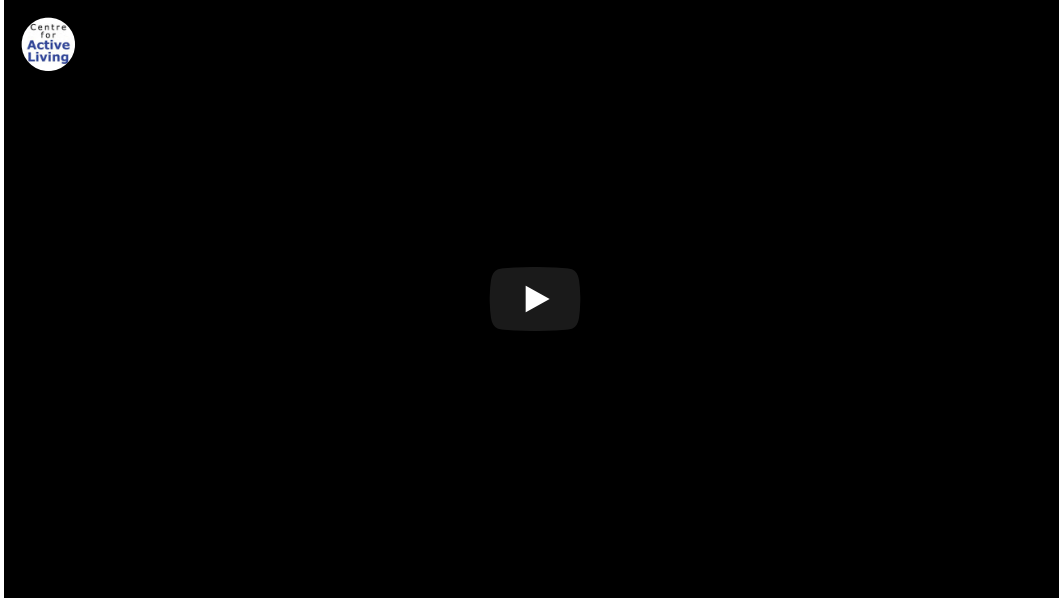
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PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

YOUTUBE



### **Yoga @ Your Desk - Part 3a: Varying the Exercises**

People who work at their desks all day tend to stay in one position for a long time. The exercises in these videos are designed to counter the effects of sitting at your desk. We suggest that you start with Part 1 and then move on to Parts 2 and 3.

**[VIEW ON YOUTUBE >](#)**

## **COMPUTER WORK**

Many of us spend the majority of our time at work using a computer. Making sure it's set up properly will save you a lot of pain and fatigue.

**ARMS & WRISTS:** Keep your wrists straight when using your keyboard. Palm or wrist supports should only be used when resting, NOT when you are typing. Your elbows should be at a relaxed 90-degree angle to the keyboard, and your back should be straight.

**MOUSE:** Place the mouse as close as possible to the keyboard. If you have shoulder problems and use a keyboard with a number pad on the right, consider learning to mouse with your left hand so you reach less and cause less strain.

**MONITOR:** Position the top of the monitor approximately 2-3" above seated eye level (if you wear bifocals, lower the monitor to a comfortable reading level). Sit at least an arm's length away from the screen and then adjust the distance for your vision.

[Source: UCLA Ergonomics](#)

**LAPTOPS:** Laptops have notoriously bad ergonomics. If you position the keyboard to be in the right place, you'll strain your neck looking down at the screen, and the smaller size of the keyboard puts strain on your wrists and shoulders. If you use a laptop more than occasionally, place it on a box or on stacked blocks of printer paper to bring the screen up to eye level, then plug in a proper keyboard and mouse.

“ Mild arthritis can be aggravated by the wrong workstation, and addressing that now controls our long-term costs.

Deanna Matzanke, Scotiabank

### Additional Resources

PODCAST: Joint Matters at Work – Workstations







[Cookie policy](#)

## **Joint Matters At Work Workstations by The Arthritis Society/Société de l'arthrite**

Stream Joint Matters At Work Workstations by The Arthritis Society/Société de l'arthrite from desktop or your mobile device

[VIEW ON SOUNDCLOUD >](#)

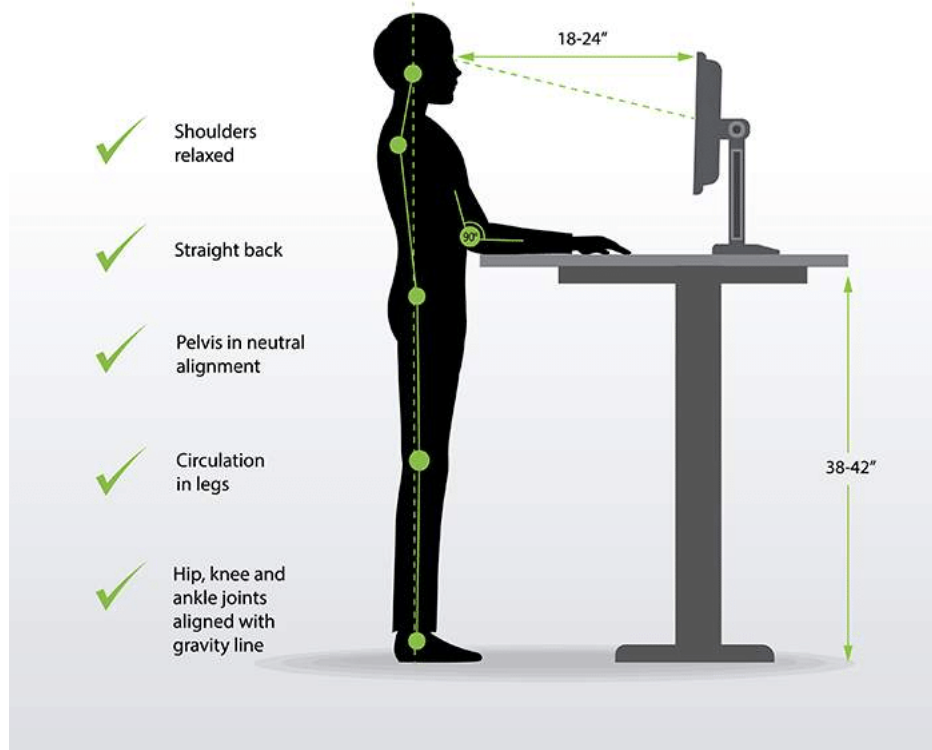
### **STANDING WORK**

There are many types of work that require long periods of standing. Constant standing is tiring for the body and can be hard on the joints.

Following are tips to help you improve your standing position at work:

**HEIGHT:** Adjust the height of your workstation to match your body size and activity or task. Adjustability ensures that you are able to carry out your work in a well-balanced body position. If your workstation cannot be adjusted, try to use a platform to raise yourself if you are shorter, or use a box or riser on top of the workstation if you are taller.

## CORRECT STANDING POSTURE



Precision work, such as writing or assembly of electronics, should be done 5 cm above elbow height, with elbow support.

Light work, such as assembly line or mechanical jobs, should be done about 5-10 cm below elbow height.

Heavy work demanding downward force should be performed from 20-40 cm below elbow height.

**WORKSPACE:** Organize your workspace to allow easy and comfortable movements. There should be enough room to move around and change your body position. Built-in foot rails or portable footrests allow you to shift your body weight from one leg to another, while elbow supports for precision work help reduce tension in the upper arms and neck. Controls and tools should be positioned so that you can reach them easily without twisting or bending.

**SIT WHEN POSSIBLE:** If you can, try to sit when possible, so you can perform your job either standing or sitting. The seat must be at a height that suits the type of work being done. If your type of work can only be done standing, find somewhere you can rest or lean occasionally. This increases the number of possible

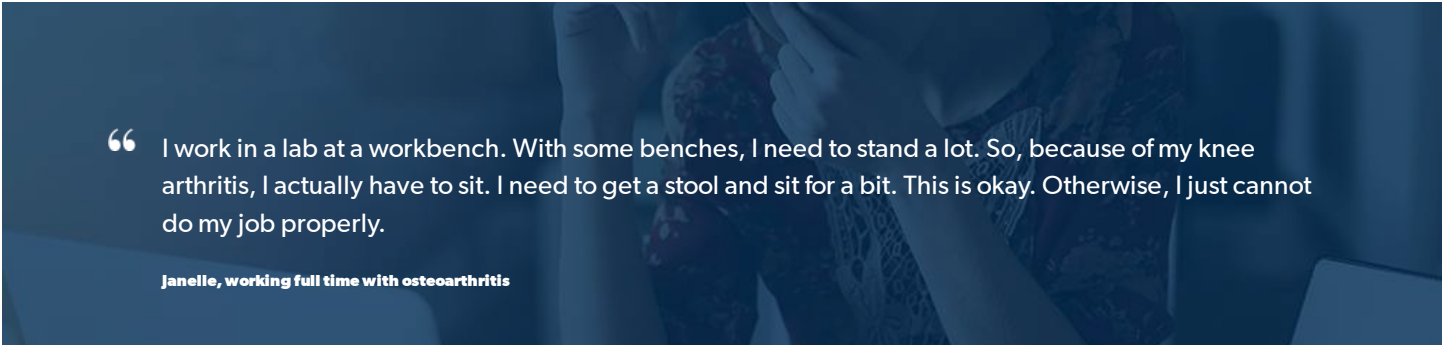
body positions in a given day and gives you more flexibility.

**THE FLOOR:** Keep work areas clear of tripping hazards. Level, nonslip floors are preferred. Concrete or metal floors are hard on your body, so consider asking for an anti-fatigue mat.

**CHANGE IT UP:** There are two important benefits you get from a variety of body positions while standing: 1) The number of muscles involved in the work is increased, which equalizes the distribution of loads on different parts of your body. This results in less strain on the individual muscles and joints used to keep you upright. 2) Changing your body position also improves blood supply to the working muscles.

**FOOTWEAR:** Select the most supportive footwear you can. Our [Daily Living learning module](#) has details about what to look for.

[Source: Adapted with permission from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)



“ I work in a lab at a workbench. With some benches, I need to stand a lot. So, because of my knee arthritis, I actually have to sit. I need to get a stool and sit for a bit. This is okay. Otherwise, I just cannot do my job properly.

Janelle, working full time with osteoarthritis

## **LIFTING**

One of the biggest causes of back injury, especially at work, is lifting or handling objects incorrectly. Learning and following the correct method for lifting and handling objects can help you to prevent back pain.

**THINK BEFORE YOU LIFT:** Plan out where the load is going to be placed and use appropriate handling devices where possible, like a hand truck or trolley. Can you slide the object instead of lifting it? Can you get help with the load? For long lifts, such as from floor to shoulder height, consider resting the load mid-way on a table or bench to change your grip on it.

**KEEP IT CLOSE:** Keep the load close to the waist for as long as possible while lifting in order to keep your upper back straight. Keep the heaviest side of the load next to the body so that the load is supported by

your leg muscles as opposed to your arms. If it is not possible to closely approach the load, try to slide it towards yourself as much as possible before trying to lift it.

**STANCE:** Your feet should be apart with one leg slightly forward along the load if it's on the ground. This will help to keep your balance. Be prepared to move your feet during the lift to keep your posture stable. Try to avoid wearing overly tight clothing or unsuitable footwear such as heels or flip-flops when lifting heavy loads.

**GET A GRIP:** Where possible, hug the load close to your body. This may be better than gripping it tightly with your hands.

**BACK STRAIGHT:** Don't bend your back when lifting. A slight bending of the back, hips and knees at the start of the lift is better than completely rounding the spine. Don't bend your back any further than that while lifting, which can happen if your legs straighten before starting to raise the load.

**DON'T DO THE TWIST:** Avoid twisting your back or leaning sideways while lifting, especially when your back is bent. Keep your shoulders level and facing the same direction as your hips. Turn your body by moving your feet rather than twisting and lifting at the same time.

**HEADS UP:** Look ahead, not down at the load once you are holding it securely.

**BE SMOOTH:** Don't jerk or snatch the load, as this can make it hard to keep control of the load and can increase your risk of injury.

**KNOW YOUR LIMITS:** Don't lift or handle more than you can easily manage. There is a difference between what you can lift and what you can safely lift. If you're in doubt, get help.

**ADJUST AFTERWARDS:** If you need to position the load precisely, put it down first, and then slide it into place.

[Source: National Health Service – Safe Lifting Tips](#)

### **Additional Resources**

Podcast: Matters at Work – Lifting



The Arthritis Society/Société de l'arthrite  
Joint Matters At Work Lifting

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Stream Joint Matters At Work Lifting by The Arthritis Society/Société de l'arthrite from desktop or your mobile device

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### Driving

The Daily Life section has lots of information about adjusting your vehicle to meet your needs. You can find it [here](#).

Podcast: Joint Matters at Work – Driving

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## THE BENEFITS OF DISCLOSURE

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### GETTING THE HELP YOU NEED AT WORK

As we've seen, many people are reluctant to disclose their health issues to their boss or co-workers. The Arthritis Society's Fit for Work study found that fewer than one in five workers with arthritis had discussed options to better manage working with arthritis.

“ Employers and co-workers are often unaware that the person has a condition that causes them chronic discomfort. They might see that a particular employee seems moody and withdrawn, and they won't attribute that to the pain or fatigue of arthritis. They may think that this is not a good worker.



### **While disclosing carries risk, so does keeping your arthritis secret.**

“Over time...costs such as physical pain, exhaustion and anxiety about being discovered can take their toll. The benefits of non-disclosure have to be set alongside the costs, which include both the extra work of hiding an impairment and the worker’s inability to request needed accommodations.”

- Robert D Wilton, Disability Disclosure in the Workplace

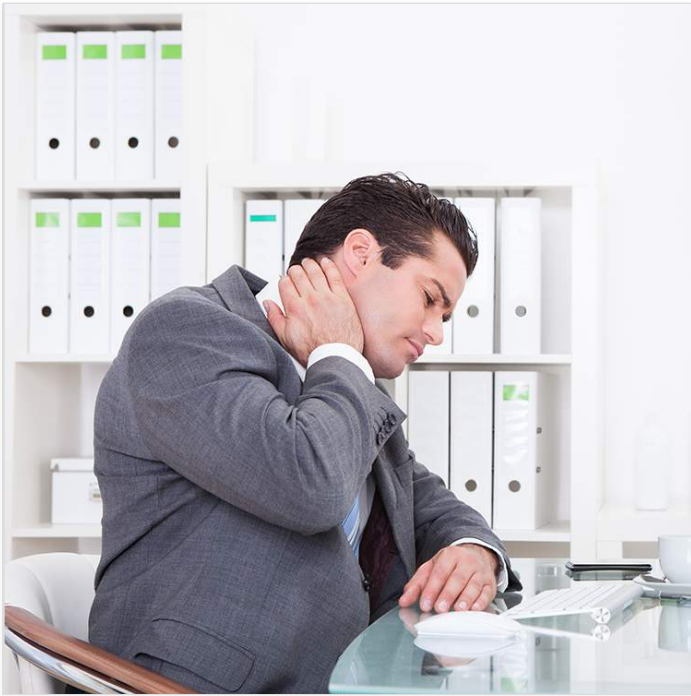
### **THE BENEFITS OF DISCLOSURE**

Every workplace is different. You are the only person who can determine whether you should disclose your health issues, but when you have arthritis, small adjustments can make a big difference in the quality of your work life. Even if you aren’t asking for major accommodations, giving people some context for your behaviour can make a big difference. Explain to your co-workers how your arthritis or persistent joint pain affects you to help them understand the times when you need some flexibility or support when you can't do



something. It will also make asking for help when you need it easier if they are already aware of the situation.

CLICK ON THE PHOTOS BELOW



"When I told my team why I was often late — when my body really hurts in the morning I need to take some time to get moving and let the meds kick in — they realized I wasn't just being lazy. I assured them that I always make up for the time later, and this has made it far less stressful for me to take the time and do what I need to do to have a productive work day."

Alison, working full time with osteoarthritis and chronic pain



"When it went really well for employees at work, people often told us it was because of their co-workers. People with good support from others at work reported less stress and were less likely to have changed jobs."

Dr. Monique Gignac, The Institute for Work and Health



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## WHEN TO DISCLOSE

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The Fit for Work study found that almost half of respondents who hadn't discussed their health issues at work did so because they felt their symptoms were currently under control. Another study found that three-quarters of study participants reported intermittent arthritis symptoms at work, but individuals tended to make changes only when symptoms were consistently high. However, potential issues can arise from the "wait and see" approach, so researchers suggest a proactive approach. Let your workplace know before there are significant challenges like high absenteeism or conflict with co-workers over incomplete work.

“ There is a possibility that, by waiting until arthritis creates problems at work, the impact of the disease on poorer productivity will increase and that it may be too late to find ways to help individuals remain employed.

**Fit for Work study, 2013**



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## WHAT TO ASK FOR

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Only you will know best what accommodations might be helpful and possible at your workplace. Here are some common types of “asks” to get you brainstorming.



### **Flexible Work Hours**

Some jobs require you to work at a particular time, but in many workplaces the hours are somewhat arbitrary, meaning you might not need to be there from exactly 9 to 5, but could instead work 7-3 or 10-6.

Point out to your boss that the benefits of flexible work hours go both ways because you will be more productive during the hours when you have the greatest energy and least pain, rather than at arbitrarily determined times.

This flexibility can be particularly helpful if you commute. You may be able to avoid rush-hour traffic and spend less time sitting in your car or standing on transit, which means you'll start your work day with less pain.

### **Equipment Changes**

Sitting at a desk all day can be physically punishing to any body, let alone one with arthritis. Finding a chair



that can be properly adjusted can make a huge difference. For jobs that require lifting, find or request a dolly to move heavy objects. If you stand a lot at work, an anti-fatigue floor mat and a foot rail will help reduce wear and tear on your body.

### **Task and Timing Adaptations**

See if there is an opportunity to work in tandem with a co-worker. For example, on days when you are experiencing a flare-up, perhaps you and a co-worker can help each other out by dividing up tasks - if they can do more of the lifting, you can do more of the organizing. Perhaps, instead of spending all morning doing one type of task and all afternoon doing another, alternating between them more frequently can give your body a break.



“ I explained to my supervisor why I can't do repetitive tasks for very long and so now I just switch positions with someone every hour or so.

**Don, living with inflammatory arthritis**



### **Rule Exceptions**

Many service industry jobs have a rule that you can't sit even if there are no customers. Let your employer know that you will be able to perform your duties more effectively if you can occasionally take the weight off your feet. Ask if you can try having a stool for a week to prove to them that it won't affect your productivity. These is a good example of what you can reasonably ask from your employer when it comes to established rules.

### **Work from Home**

Thanks to advances in technology, many jobs no longer need to be done in a specific place. Working from home even one day a week might make a big difference in your fatigue and pain levels.

This is a good reason to discuss your condition with your employer even if your symptoms are mild: proving to your boss that you can work unsupervised and that your productivity remains high when you work at



home will allay any fears they might have about the arrangement, and they will be more comfortable accommodating you in the future if you need to work from home should your symptoms worsen.

### **Creating a Contingency Plan**

Explaining the episodic nature of your flare-ups means that your co-workers will know to expect changes from day-to-day. Develop an A-B-C plan: “A” is what you will do most days. “B” is for when you need to modify your tasks somewhat. “C” is what you will do if things are really bad and you can’t work.

This conversation can be tough to start, but it means that no one will have to scramble to figure out what to do. It might even help you talk about your symptoms — you can tell your co-worker that “this is a B-day” and they’ll know what to expect.



## HOW TO ASK

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Only you will be able to make the decision about whether to speak to your employer, but your employer can't help you manage your joint issues if they don't know about them. If you choose to speak with your employer, here are some suggestions for getting prepared for the conversation.

- 1 Determine exactly what you want to achieve. Are you just letting them know, or do you have specific asks?
- 2 Do background research to establish your credibility and answer any questions they might have.
- 3 Develop two to three key messages that you want to get across.

- 4 Determine your audience. Is it your boss? Your co-workers? The human resources department? A union representative?
- 5 Consider your key messages in relation to your audience's interests and concerns.
- 6 Present your solution as a “win” for both of you and show them that they will benefit from the changes by getting the maximum productivity out of you.
- 7 Practice what you are going to say ahead of time with a trusted friend, co-worker or family member.
- 8 Be persistent and set expectations. While your employer might agree to make changes, things often get lost in the shuffle. You are the only one who can make this a top priority. Establish the time frame in which the changes will happen and check in to remind them what needs to be done.

**Additional resources:**

[Joint Matters at Work Checklists – How to Deal with Arthritis and Persistent Musculoskeletal Disorders in the Workplace – A Guide for Employers, Employees and Health Care Providers](#)



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## YOUR RIGHTS AT WORK

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Ninety per cent of workers in Canada are protected by the employment laws of their province or territory. The remaining 10 per cent are in jobs covered by federal laws. These include jobs working for the federal government, a bank, a company that transports goods between provinces, a telecommunications company, and most businesses owned and run by the federal government.

If you work for a federally regulated business or industry, contact the Federal Labour Program.

## Federal Labour Program

Employment and Social Development Canada

[Federal Labour Standards](#)

Toll Free: 1-800-641-4049

If you do not work for a federally regulated business or industry, the employment standards that regulate your conditions of work are likely covered by a provincial or territorial employment standards office found below.

### Alberta

[Labour Employment Standards Branch](#)

Toll free: 1-877-427-3731

Fax: (780) 422-4349

TDD/TDY: 780-427-9999 (in Edmonton)

### British Columbia

Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and Minister Responsible for Labour

[Employment Standards Branch](#)

Toll free: 1-800-663-3316

Outside British Columbia: (250) 612-4100

### Manitoba

Manitoba Labour and Immigration

[Employment Standards](#)

Telephone: (204) 945-3352 (Winnipeg)

Toll free: 1-800-821-4307 (outside Winnipeg)

Fax: (204) 948-3046

### New Brunswick

Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour

[Employment Standards Branch](#)

Telephone: (506) 453-2725 (Fredericton or outside New Brunswick)

Toll free: 1-888-452-2687

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**Newfoundland and Labrador** —

Advanced Education, Skills and Labour

[Labour Standards Division](#)

Telephone: (709) 729-2743/729-2742

Toll free: 1-877-563-1063

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**Northwest Territories** —

Education, Culture and Employment

[Employment Standards](#)

Telephone: (867) 767-9351 option 3

Toll free: 1-888-700-5707

Fax: (867) 873-0483

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**Nova Scotia** —

Labour and Advanced Education

[Labour Standards Division](#)

Telephone: (902) 424-4311

Toll free: 1-888-315-0110

Fax: (902) 424-0648

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**Nunavut** —

Department of Justice

[Labour Standards Office](#)

Telephone: (867) 975-7293

Toll Free: 1-877-806-8402

Fax: (867) 975-7294

(Note: minimal information on website)

**Ontario**

Ministry of Labour

[Employment Standards Branch](#)

Telephone: (416) 326-7160 (Greater Toronto Area)

Toll free: 1-800-531-5551

TTY: 1-866-567-8893

**Prince Edward Island**

Communities, Cultural Affairs and Labour

[Employment Standards Branch](#)

Telephone: (902) 368-5552

Toll-free: 1-800-333-4360

Fax: (902) 368-5476

**Quebec**

[Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail \(CNESST\)](#)

Toll free: 1-844-838-0808

**Saskatchewan**

Advanced Education, Employment and Labour

[Labour Standards](#)

Telephone: (306) 787-2438 (Regina)

Toll free: 1-800-667-1783

Fax: (306) 787-4780 (Regina)

**Yukon**

Department of Community Services

[Employment Standards Branch](#)

Telephone: (867) 667-5944

Toll free: 1-800-661-0408, extension 5944

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[Employment standards in Canada – Government of Canada website](#)

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## STAY IN TOUCH

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Thank you for taking a few minutes to [complete our survey](#). Your feedback will guide the ongoing improvement of our programs to help you and other Canadians better manage your arthritis.



[Sign up to the flourish e-newsletter](#) to receive health and wellness advice, self management tips, inspirational stories and much more to help you move through life with arthritis.



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