

# Arthritis in the Workplace

## A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS



### What is Arthritis?

There are thought to be 10 million people with some form of arthritis in the UK<sup>1</sup>. That equates to 1 in 6 people living with the pain it causes. It is the most common cause of disability in the UK and can affect people of all ages, not just older people.

There are millions of working-age people also affected by arthritis and recent NHS digital data shows that more than 40% of hip replacements and almost 50% of knee replacements are performed on people aged 50-69<sup>2</sup>.

The most common type of arthritis affecting working-age people is osteoarthritis, also known as "wear-and tear" arthritis which commonly affects the knees, hips and spine. About 18% of people over 45 (1 in 6 people) have sought medical help for osteoarthritis pain<sup>3</sup>. Inflammatory arthritis including rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis and axial spondyloarthritis which together affect

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<sup>1</sup> Annual consultation prevalence of regional musculoskeletal problems in primary care: an observational study. Jordan, K P, et al. 144, s.l. : BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders, 2010, Vol. 11

<sup>2</sup> Patient Profile – NHS Digital, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/patient-reported-outcome-measures-proms/finalised-hip-knee-replacements-april-2018---march-2019/patient-profile>

<sup>3</sup> National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, <https://www.nice.org.uk/cks-uk-only>

about 2-3% of the working population, occurs when the immune system attacks the joints and spine and causes pain, stiffness and swelling which is often much worse in the morning.

Arthritis often causes unpredictable and disabling pain, stiffness and swelling in the joints and is also associated with fatigue, anxiety and depression, however employees often keep their symptoms hidden. It is vital that employers understand these conditions and work with their employees to create a supportive workplace.

The next most common type of arthritis is “inflammatory arthritis”, such as rheumatoid arthritis, where the immune system attacks the joints, causing swelling, pain and stiffness; and gout which is caused by crystals of uric acid irritating the joints. There are many other forms of inflammatory arthritis including psoriatic arthritis and spondyloarthropathy (including ankylosing spondylitis).

## How may it Impact my Business?

Ill health from arthritis results in significant costs for individuals, employers, the health service, and the wider economy.

- In 2018, 17.1% of adults reported having a long-term musculoskeletal condition, 80.9% of whom have also reported chronic pain<sup>4</sup>. This means they are managing pain and discomfort every day.
- The cost of working days lost due to osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis was estimated at £2.58 billion in 2017, rising to £3.43 billion by 2030.<sup>5</sup>
- 53% of people surveyed with musculoskeletal conditions say their symptoms (pain, fatigue, immobility) have a negative impact on their work.<sup>6</sup>
- Too often, employees keep conditions like arthritis a secret as they worry about how their employer or colleagues will react, or they fear they could lose their jobs. This can lead to anxiety and affect work performance, general wellbeing, as well as a bigger impact on mental health.
- Roughly a quarter (27%) of people say they have experienced added stress in the working environment as a result of their arthritis<sup>7</sup>.

## What are my Obligations as an Employer?

- The Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations scheduled to come into force on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2024 require employers to consider flexible working requests from day one of employment, so it makes sense to incorporate these into your recruitment strategies from the outset.
- Ensure your employees know their medical conditions are private and confidential and that you will not share your details with anyone who does not need to know.

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<sup>4</sup> Figures from the Office for Health Improvement & Disparities' Musculoskeletal health: trends, risk factors and disparities in England, <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/musculoskeletal-conditions/musculoskeletal-health-trends-risk-factors-and-disparities-in-england.html>

<sup>5</sup> Figures from Versus Arthritis: The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2023, York Health Economics. The Cost of Arthritis: Calculation conducted on behalf of Arthritis Research UK. s.l. : Unpublished, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Versus Arthritis. Unmet Needs Research - Survey Data. (2020). Unpublished.

<sup>7</sup> YouGov 'Arthritis the Impact on Daily Life' for Arthritis Action, 2022.

- Employees should be made aware they have a right to request reasonable adjustments to allow them to continue in a role.

## What else can I do to support Employees?

Creating a more supportive workplace can result in greater productivity, morale, retention, as well as reduced sickness absence and 'presenteeism'.

- It is essential that employers and managers learn more about life with MSK conditions and foster a workplace where employees feel they can discuss their health openly with their employer.
- Small changes can have a big difference for people living with arthritis. This can include employers offering more flexible working hours, longer or more frequent breaks throughout the day, and increased availability of specialised equipment such as standing desks and ergonomic chairs.
- The Government's Access to Work Scheme can provide help where expensive adjustments are necessary to allow employees to remain at work and you may be eligible for a grant to cover these. The scheme can also help with mental health support.
- Often, people with arthritis just need understanding and reassurance that they are not alone and that their symptoms will get better with support. It can be helpful to signpost employees to charities like Arthritis Action, or local services, where available. Charities can then help them improve their mental health or feelings of isolation, and signpost them to local resources and support.

## Helpful resources

- Our [Arthritis Action website](#) provides people living with arthritis support to self-manage their condition to enable them to live as pain free as possible.
- Our [Mental Health Directory](#) helps signpost people to mental health support in their local area.
- The Office for Health Improvement & Disparities have worked with the British Society of Rheumatology to develop a useful [Musculoskeletal Health Toolkit for Employers and Further Education Institutions](#), to help employers limit the impact of MSK conditions like arthritis in the workplace and help employees thrive and succeed.
- The Access to Work Scheme <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>.