



The Impact of Osteoarthritis

11 October 2024

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Introduction

Background and method

This report presents a summary of the findings from an online survey of 1,427 people in Great Britain aged 25 to 65 who report living with osteoarthritis, as part of a wider survey of 2,120 people with osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis. Arthritis Action commissioned YouGov to carry out the research to explore the experience of people of working age in Great Britain who are living with these conditions. The survey was conducted between 14th January and 8th February 2022. All respondents were drawn from the YouGov online panel of people who have signed up to undertake research with YouGov.

The summary report shares the impacts of osteoarthritis on people's personal and professional lives, and investigates the effects arthritis can have on personal well-being and mental health. It also explores people's experiences of support and self-management.

The report explores varying impacts of osteoarthritis among different age groups between 25 and 65. Analysis has been conducted using a younger age group, defined as ages 25 to 39 (with a sample size of n=127), a middle group defined as ages 40 to 54 (n=568), and an older group which comprises ages 55 to 65 (n=732).

Summary of key findings

- People with osteoarthritis report a range of impacts from the condition, including impacts on physical activities, daily tasks and working lives. Generally, these impacts appear to be more pronounced among younger adults with arthritis, who were more likely to report that their ability to work, commute, maintain intimacy and make or keep social arrangements had been affected.
- The results suggest that osteoarthritis and its associated pain can take a notable toll on mental health, and this is particularly the case for younger adults, who were more likely to report feeling depressed when their arthritis pain is at its worst.
- Osteoarthritis can have implications on working lives, with around half reporting an impact on either their or their partner's working life, such as having to give up work or take time off. Younger age groups are more likely to say they had to change the type of work they do or move to a different role within their organisation, while older adults were more likely to say they had to take early retirement.

- Most with osteoarthritis have concerns about the impact of the condition, both currently and in the future, with common concerns including that the pain they experience from arthritis will get worse over time, or about the impact on leisure activities. Younger adults were more likely to have concerns about the impact of arthritis on various areas such as their parenting, personal relationships, financial situation/security, and recreational activities, when compared with their older counterparts. Those in the youngest age group (25 to 39) were also more likely than the middle age group (40 to 54) to have concerns about their ability to have and raise children or the impact of arthritis on their fertility, probably reflecting the higher likelihood of them still planning to have children in the future.

Key findings

General impacts of arthritis

People with osteoarthritis report a range of impacts on their daily lives. Almost three in five (58%) say they struggle with going up and down stairs when their arthritis is at its worst, while around half report struggling with carrying out daily tasks (48%), gardening (47%), and getting around (47%). Working presents a difficulty for a third (34%), while over a quarter struggle with intimacy and with making or keeping social arrangements (both 27%).

Several everyday activities, such as working, intimacy, and making or keeping social arrangements, are identified as a struggle by younger age groups with osteoarthritis more than older age groups. For example, working is more likely to be reported as a struggle for those aged 25 to 39 (40%) and 40 to 54 (39%) than those aged 55 to 65 (32%), perhaps reflecting that many in the older age group may have taken early retirement or otherwise ceased or reduced working, and commuting shows a similar pattern (24% of 25 to 39s falling to 11% of those aged 55-65).

The same pattern can also be seen for intimacy, with 32% of 25 to 39s and 40 to 54s reporting this as a struggle, compared to 25% of 55 to 65s. Younger people (aged 25 to 39) are also more likely to say they struggle to make or keep social arrangements (40% of this age group vs. 24% of 55 to 65s).

The only activities for which older age groups are more likely to report that they struggle are getting out of a chair (47% of 55 to 65s vs. 35% of 25 to 39s), and gardening (49% vs. 36% of 25 to 39s); the latter may reflect a higher prevalence of this activity among older age groups in general.

Emotional impacts and mental health

The results indicate that dealing with osteoarthritis and its associated pain can take a notable toll on mental health. Three in five (60%) report feeling depressed when their arthritis pain is at its worst. Younger people are more likely to say this, with 70% of 25 to 39s and 64% of 40 to 54s saying they feel depressed when the pain is at its worst, compared to 58% of those aged 55 to 65.

When asked how often the *pain* associated with their arthritis made them feel down or depressed, answer options included: always; often; sometimes; rarely, or never. In response, around half (48%) say it either always or often makes them feel down or depressed. Those aged 40 to 54 are the most likely to say this, with 54% saying they always or often feel down or depressed due to the pain from their arthritis. Those aged 55 to 65 are the age group most likely to say it rarely or never makes them feel down or depressed, with 17% saying this.

Overall, 41% say the *fatigue* related to their arthritis makes them feel down or depressed; however, this figure varies by age group. Around half of those aged 25 to 39 (50%) and 40 to 54 (46%) say the fatigue related to their arthritis makes them feel down or depressed, while a lower proportion of those aged 55 to 65 report this (38%).

While the survey did not specifically explore why the pain and fatigue related to their arthritis make them feel down and depressed, younger age groups are more likely to report struggling with working, intimacy, and making or keeping social arrangements. If these everyday activities are being affected by osteoarthritis, this could have negative impacts on the mental health of those suffering from the condition.

Impacts on working life

Managing the pain and limitations of arthritis can have implications for someone's work or that of those close to them. While the highest proportion of those with osteoarthritis say that their arthritis has not affected their or their partner's working life (41%), just under one in six (16%) report that they had to give up work and 12% had to take time off work as a result of it. Around one in ten had to change the type of work they do or move to part-time position / reduce their hours (both 10%).

Younger age groups are more likely to say they had to change the type of work they do (24% of 25 to 39s and 16% of 40 to 54s vs. 10% of 55 to 65s) or move to a different role within their organisation (8% of 25 to 39s vs 3% of 40 to 54s and 2% of those aged 55 to 65). In contrast, one in ten (10%) 55 to 65s say they had to take early retirement due to their arthritis, compared with 6% of 25 to 39s and 3% of those aged 40 to 54.

The majority – just under three quarters (73%) – of those working say they do not typically miss any work due to their arthritis. Nonetheless, about one in five (19%) miss one or more hours per month due to their arthritis or its side effects. There are negligible differences in this by age.

The implications of arthritis at work entail more than the type of work done or hours spent doing it. Around a quarter of those with osteoarthritis report added stress in the work environment (26%) or feeling less confident in their ability to do their job (24%). Over one in five report difficulty coping with the job, or feel that there is a lack of understanding of their needs from their employer and/or their colleagues (all 22%). While overall there are limited differences by age, 55- to 65-year-olds are more likely to say they feel this lack of understanding from their employer or and have difficulty coping with the job (both 25%).

Areas of concerns around arthritis

Those with osteoarthritis were presented with a list of statements to which they could agree or disagree. Over eight in ten (85%) express concern that the pain they experience from arthritis will get worse over time, while around three in four (73%) worry they will not be able to continue to enjoy their leisure activities as a result of their arthritis – these are concerns that transcend age groups.

Just over two in five (43%) of those who are employed feel anxious that their arthritis will negatively impact their performance at work, while two in five (40%) also say it is difficult to plan ahead for events or activities because of their arthritis. Over half (51%) of those aged 25 to 39 report this, a significantly higher proportion than the 39% of 55 to 65s who say the same.

Respondents were asked to indicate how concerned or not they are about potential future impacts of arthritis. Half (48%) of those with osteoarthritis say they feel very or fairly concerned about their arthritis interfering with their work or career, a proportion which is similar across age groups.

Among those with osteoarthritis aged under 55, one in five (20%) say they feel anxious about their ability to have and raise children or the impact of arthritis on their fertility; when broken down further by age, 37% of those aged 25 to 39 and 18% of those aged 40 to 54 say they feel anxious about this. This higher level of concern among younger adults – twice the proportion of those slightly older – probably reflects the higher likelihood of them still planning to have children in the future compared to the older age group.

Close to half also express concerns over arthritis interfering with their parenting (48%), personal relationships (47%), and financial situation/security (45%). When broken down by age group, higher proportions of younger people are concerned about the impact of arthritis on these elements of their lives. Around two-thirds (66%) of those aged 25 to 39 feel concerned about their arthritis interfering with their personal relationships, significantly more than the 51% of 40 to 54s and 45% of 55 to 65s who say the same.

Over three in five (62%) 25 to 39s are concerned about the impact on their parenting, compared to 50% of 40 to 54s and 37% of 55 to 65s – this probably pertains to parents in the younger age group typically having younger children while those in the older age groups are more likely to have older and more independent children. Around three in five 25 to 39s (59%) and 40 to 54s (56%) worry about their arthritis with respect to their financial situation, while a smaller proportion (41%) of those aged 55 to 65 express concern over this.

High levels of concern are reported over the prospect of arthritis interfering with recreational activities, with 77% saying this overall. While concern is high across the age groups, younger respondents are more likely to report this concern (86% of 25 to 39 year olds compared to 76% of 55 to 65 year olds). There are similarly high levels of concern across all ages over the impact of arthritis on their mobility (81% overall) and independence (71%).

Self-management

With regards to self-management of arthritis, nearly two in five (39%) of those with osteoarthritis say they have heard of this concept, while three in five (61%) have not. Younger age groups, aged 25 to 39, are more likely to report having heard of it (49%) than those aged 55 to 65 (38%).

When asked what self-management techniques they use to help manage their arthritis, the most commonly reported techniques include doing exercise (47%), healthy eating (43%), and weight management (41%). Those aged 25 to 39 are more likely than those in the middle age group (40 to 54) to report using exercise for self-management (57% vs. 45%). Those aged 55 to 65 are more likely to mention healthy eating (45%), while those aged 40 to 54 are less likely to say that this is a technique they use (38%).

Diagnosis journey

Of those with osteoarthritis, nearly a quarter (23%) experienced pain/discomfort related to arthritis for over five years before being diagnosed with the condition. While 13% spent less than a year with arthritis pain before getting a diagnosis, most spent between one and two (35%) or three and five (22%) years. This was the case across all age categories. Perceptions of support from the medical staff who were involved in the arthritis diagnosis were divided, with half (49%) feeling very or somewhat supported and 44% feeling not very or not at all supported. This was broadly reflected across ages, however, those aged 40 to 54 are significantly more likely to say they felt very supported (18%) compared to those aged 25 to 39 (6%). This younger group is more likely to say they felt somewhat supported (42%) than those aged 40 to 54 (31%).