

Adapting the work environment for arthritis

A resource for patients by patients

At CAPA, we are patients too and we know that a diagnosis of arthritis means changes at work. Because of this, we launched a [survey](#) on arthritis in the workplace to explore the experiences of people with arthritis. From this survey, we developed resources to help those living with arthritis including:

- 1 [Adapting the work environment for arthritis](#)
 - 2 [Self-care for work](#)
 - 3 [Know your workplace rights](#)
 - 4 [Workplace wisdom from patients](#)
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Workplace challenges

People with arthritis feel that it is important to work for many reasons. Working provides income, gives a sense of purpose and provides a focus away from arthritis. People told us that working with arthritis can be tiring and negatively affects their health. People told us that working with arthritis caused:

- Greater fatigue
- Difficulty staying focused due to arthritis symptoms such as fatigue and pain
- Challenges doing physical tasks
- Feeling down or stressed

“It can be hard because of your many limitations but don’t despair. Where there is a will, there is a way. You will find something you can do, and do well.”

Other workplace challenges associated with arthritis include ([Lacaille et al](#), [Hoving et al](#), [Lacaille et al](#)):

- Finding a job that matches your abilities
- Balancing work and the requirement to attend medical appointments
- Commuting to and from work

Studies also show that the invisibility and unpredictability of symptoms can create challenges with the decision to disclose and request job accommodations ([Gignac et al](#), [Gignac et al](#)).

Workplace accommodation or adjustments

Workplace accommodations or adjustments are important to staying productive at work with arthritis.

- ✓ Workplace accommodations or adjustments are adaptations to the work environment to allow people with a health condition or disability to carry out their job duties.

“If you feel comfortable, ask for accommodations from your employer. Addressing the issue early can help you not do further damage.”

People who answered our survey said that they first modify non-work activities (e.g. at home tasks to preserve energy) before they request for workplace accommodations. Many countries, including Canada, have laws that require employers to offer reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities in the workplace. Research suggests that people who use workplace accommodation are more likely to keep a job and stay productive compared to those who don't use workplace supports ([Gignac et al](#)).

Accessing workplace accommodation

Asking for workplace accommodations can be difficult. Many people with arthritis don't want to be treated differently and may be concerned about negative reactions from a supervisor or colleague(s). If you trust your manager or supervisor, consider sharing details about your arthritis and asking for workplace accommodations or adjustments. Before talking with your supervisor, learn more about your workplace rights by reading our resource [“Know your workplace rights”](#).

Research shows that sometimes people with invisible, episodic health conditions prefer to negotiate accommodations informally with their supervisors or use supports available to all employees, rather than seeking formal accommodations ([Oldfield et al](#)). For this reason, you may wish to ask for informal changes to working conditions.

Helpful workplace accommodations

People who answered our survey shared some helpful workplace accommodations:

- **Modified work tasks**

Examples: working on more difficult tasks earlier in the day, pacing work, asking for support from co-worker(s), limiting non-essential job tasks, limiting repetitive movements

- **Reduced work hours**

Examples: shorter work weeks or days (though this means less income)



“Find a job where you are autonomous and can plan your schedule and pace yourself to fit your needs.”

- **Improved physical layout and equipment**
Examples: selecting a chair, stool, keyboard, mouse, desk that address arthritis limitations, modified entryways or availability of elevators

“I changed my job to adapt to my arthritis. I have worked from home for three years and my quality of life has improved drastically.”

- **Flexible hours of work**
Examples: Shift your start time to later morning, leaving earlier

- **Take breaks for joints and body recovery**
Examples: take breaks every hour even if just changing positions for a few minutes

- **Work from home**
Examples: if possible, set up a schedule to work from home on specific days, work from home on mornings where you aren't feeling well.

Research has identified other workplace accommodation options, such as job-sharing options and switching to less physically demanding work ([Gignac et al](#), [Jetha et al](#)). For more information on helpful job accommodations, refer to the Job Accommodation Network [website](#) on arthritis. Helpful workplace accommodations are different from one workplace to another.



IMPORTANT: More than one accommodation is often needed to help you at work. You may need to improve the management of your arthritis, adjust non-work activities, and ask for workplace accommodations from your employer.

Related resources

- [Ergonomic Workplace Tips](#) (The Arthritis Foundation)
- [Workplace resource](#) (The Arthritis Society)
- Adapting your [physical workspace](#) (The Arthritis Society)

- [Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employees \(Arthritis Ireland\)](#)
 - [Arthritis Research UK – Reasonable adjustments](#)
 - [Working When Chronically Ill: Workplace Accommodations and Navigating Disability Issues](#) (specific to United States laws)
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