

## Work and arthritis

This leaflet provides information  
and answers to your questions  
about working with arthritis.



# Work and arthritis



Arthritis affects people of all ages in the UK, including many people of working age. The unpredictable nature of the condition can make a normal working life difficult. In this booklet we'll help you to explore your options and explain how to change your work environment to suit your needs. We'll also tell you where you can go to seek advice.

At the back of this booklet you'll find a brief glossary of medical words – we've underlined these when they're first used in the booklet.

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**With problem tasks,  
often it's not *what* you do,  
it's the *way* that you do it  
that makes the difference.**

**If a task causes  
you a problem,  
ask yourself:  
how can I do  
it differently?**

# At a glance

## Work and arthritis

Simple measures and outside help can all make a difference.

The symptoms of arthritis can be unpredictable, and this can make a working life difficult. If you have arthritis, the decision to keep working or return to work in the future will need a lot of thought and discussion.

### What are the common problems?

Common problems include:

- not being able to perform all of the tasks required of you
- things taking much longer than they used to
- stress of your job causing your condition to flare-up or make your symptoms worse
- not having the energy or stamina to work like you used to
- getting fatigued easily.

### What can I do?

The four P's can help make working a little easier:

- **problem solving**
- **planning**
- **prioritising**
- **pacing.**

### Who else can help?

The following people may be able to offer you support:

- your **employer** or **your company's occupational health department** (if it has one) – try to reach a joint agreement about how your difficulties can be addressed
- **colleagues** may be able to swap certain tasks
- **The government** helps through things like The 2005 Disability Discrimination Act, which requires employers to make reasonable changes to working practices or premises to overcome disadvantage caused by disability
- your local **Jobcentre Plus** office will offer many services that can help you overcome problems at work.

**Deciding whether to continue working isn't an easy decision.** You need to weigh up a number of factors, including your motives, your present circumstances, your options and your finances. You may find you have more choices than you realise.

## Introduction

Arthritis affects people of all ages in the UK, including many people of working age. Arthritis can cause pain, stiffness and tiredness, all of which can vary – in a single day or over a period of months. Each person’s experience of arthritis is unique, and the unpredictable nature of the condition can make a normal working life difficult.

For some, the decision to continue working or to return to work will need a lot of thought and discussion. Ask for help from people at your place of work, such as a friend, colleague or manager. You can also seek advice from experts such as occupational therapists, a Jobcentre Plus office and the Citizens Advice Bureau. They can work with you and your employer to find the best solution for everyone.

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**i See Arthritis Research UK booklets**  
*Osteoarthritis; Rheumatoid arthritis;*  
*What is arthritis?*

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**The two most common types of arthritis are rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.**

## What are the common problems?

If you have arthritis you may find that you experience difficulties at work. The most common problems are:

- not being able to perform all of the tasks required of you – this is particularly the case with manual occupations or if your condition limits you physically
- things taking much longer than they used to
- stress of your job causing your condition to flare-up or making symptoms worse
- not having the energy or stamina to work like you used to
- getting fatigued easily – this can lead to you not having the energy for things outside of work time.

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**i See Arthritis Research UK booklet**  
*Fatigue and arthritis.*

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If arthritis is limiting your ability to work, then you should ask for help sooner rather than later. It’s a common feeling for people to want to battle on but it’s important to get the right advice and support at an early stage.

Getting the correct advice or support on improving your physical working area will help you do your job better and more comfortably.

## What can I do?

There are several things you can do to make life easier. You need to try to find a way to carry out your work that allows you to manage your pain and tiredness and reduce the stress on your joints.

The key to success is to do a variety of tasks, in stages and with rest breaks.

Remember the four 'P's' – problem solving, planning, prioritising and pacing:

**Problem solving** – Often it's not *what* you do, it's the *way* that you do it that makes a difference. Look at your daily work 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 do certain tasks, or you get very tired by the afternoon. If a task causes you a problem, ask yourself: how can I do it differently?

**Planning** – Make a plan of the things you want to achieve during the day or over the week. Plan how and when you're going to do certain tasks. Ensure that the demanding jobs are spaced out during each day or week.

**Prioritising** – If you list the tasks you need to do you can prioritise them and decide what tasks you can remove, delay or hand over. Ask yourself: Does this need to be done today? Does it need to be done at all? Does it need to be me who does it? Can I get someone to help me with some parts of the task?

**Pacing** – Break tasks into achievable parts and spread them throughout the day or week, and take regular short rest breaks. Change your position and your activity regularly. Don't use pain as a guide for when to stop, change your task or rest if you're uncomfortable.



This advice won't cure your arthritis but it should make working a little easier. There's often a simple solution, but remember that there are professionals who have lots of good advice to share with you as well. A good place to start is by talking to your manager and together asking for a workplace assessment. This can be arranged through the company's occupational health department (if it has one), an occupational therapist or [physiotherapist](#) (via your GP or hospital).

From speaking with people who've had to change the way they work, we know that the sooner you seek help, the more options become available.

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**i See Arthritis Research UK booklets**

*Looking after your joints when you have arthritis; Occupational therapy and arthritis; Physiotherapy and arthritis.*

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## How can my colleagues or employer help?

Flexibility in working hours or in the different things you have to do at work can make a big difference to how you cope. You may be able to make changes to your work environment, for example:

- moving your work station
- trying a different office chair
- using equipment or technology that could make the tasks easier
- swapping certain tasks with colleagues.

Try talking things over with your manager or work colleagues. Outline with your manager what difficulties you have and try to agree how these can be addressed.

## Who do I need to talk to?

Figure 1 lists some common questions and options to consider and who to talk them through with.



**Figure 1 Who do I need to talk to?**

Question/option:	Discuss with:
Would more help at home take the pressure off you? (e.g. help with housework or shopping)	Partner/family Occupational therapist
Is your arthritis likely to get better/worse?	GP Rheumatology team
What treatment options are available and what's their likely success?	GP Rheumatology team
Working fewer hours/job sharing	Partner/family Employer/Occupational Health Department Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) Occupational therapist
Change of job within same organisation	Employer/Occupational Health Department DEA Occupational therapist
Working from home	Employer Partner/family DEA Occupational therapist
Retraining for lighter work	Employer Careers service DEA
Phased return to work	Occupational Health Department DEA Occupational therapist

## How does the government help?

The 2005 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) makes it unlawful for employers to treat a disabled person less favourably than anyone else because of their disability, in terms of recruitment, training, promotion and dismissal.

It also requires employers to make reasonable adjustments to working practices or premises to overcome substantial disadvantage caused by disability. Reasonable adjustments can include, where possible:

- changing or modifying tasks
- altering work patterns
- providing special equipment
- allowing time off to attend appointments
- help with travel to work.

If your arthritis is causing serious problems at work, help is available through your local **Jobcentre Plus** office.

The **Access to Work** (AtW) scheme is available to help overcome the problems resulting from your arthritis by offering practical advice and help, tailored to your needs in your job. For example, it can help pay for special aids or equipment or for adaptations to the premises, or with the additional costs of travelling to work if you're unable to use public transport.

**Disability Employment Advisors** (DEAs) can also offer advice and support with work issues. If you're not currently working, your DEA can help you decide on the best way for you to return to work and help you find a suitable job. This might be through a **Pathways to Work** programme – designed to help people who are claiming incapacity benefits to start or return to work. There are a number of schemes available that can help you update your skills, or learn new ones, build up your confidence and provide work experience in a supported environment.

❗ If your arthritis prevents you from working altogether, then the Jobcentre Plus team will be able to advise you on the various options available to you.

## Fit notes

Long absences from work may lead to you losing confidence, losing skills, a feeling of isolation or even job loss. The fit note system aims to stop this from happening. Replacing the sick note, fit notes are provided by your doctor if you're on sick leave for over 7 days. They advise whether, with the right support from your employer, you're able to return to work earlier. They may suggest:

- a phased return to work
- altered hours
- amended duties
- workplace adaptations.



You should discuss these options with your employer to see if you can return to work, taking into account the effects of your condition. For more information, visit the Department of Work and Pensions website [www.dwp.gov.uk/fitnote](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/fitnote).

## Should I keep working?

Deciding whether to continue working isn't an easy decision. You need to weigh up a number of factors, including your reasons for working, your present circumstances, your options and your finances. You may find that there are more choices available to you than you first thought.

Don't make a hasty decision about something as important as work. You may be going through a particularly difficult patch with your arthritis or your job, but you should try and stay positive – things may improve given time and patience.

Before you make a decision, you need to be clear in your mind about two important questions:

1. Do I **want** to work?
2. Do I **need** to work?

Most people work not only for money, but also because working gives a sense of achievement, structure to the day, social contact and social status. However, these

things aren't of equal importance to everyone. Juggling home and work is only going to be rewarding if you *want* to work. But for many people there's the financial reality of *needing* to work.

So, what are your options if you want and need to work, have looked at simple solutions, discussed the difficulties with your colleagues but still can't imagine continuing in the same job? Think through each of the options outlined in Figure 1, making notes and gathering information as you go. Then check your financial situation before you make any decision (see Figure 2).

Try to find someone you can trust, and who can be objective, to talk it over with. It's worth seeking the advice of an occupational therapist or your occupational health department. Also find out what your partner and family think.

The final answer may not be perfect, but it may be a positive one made on the basis of all the best information you can gather. It needs to be the right decision for you, taken at the right time, and supported by those around you.

**Figure 2 Financial considerations**

Check your contract or terms of employment.

Do you have permanent health insurance cover?

What is your sick leave entitlement?

How much do you/your family need to live on?

What benefits would you be eligible for if you reduced your hours?

What benefits would you be entitled to if you did stop work?

Can you take early retirement on health grounds?



## Glossary

**Occupational therapist** – a trained specialist who works with you to find solutions to the day-to-day challenges you face at work and at home.

**Osteoarthritis** – the most common form of arthritis (mainly affecting the joints in the fingers, knees, hips), causing cartilage thinning and bony overgrowths (osteophytes) and resulting in pain, swelling and stiffness.

**Physiotherapist** – a trained specialist who helps to keep your joints and muscles moving, helps ease pain and keeps you mobile.

**Rheumatoid arthritis** – an inflammatory disease affecting the joints, particularly the lining of the joint. It most commonly starts in the smaller joints in a symmetrical pattern – that is, for example, in both hands or both wrists at once.

## Where can I find out more?

If you've found this information useful you might be interested in these other titles from our range:

### Conditions

- *Osteoarthritis*
- *Rheumatoid arthritis*
- *What is arthritis?*

### Therapies

- *Occupational therapy and arthritis*
- *Physiotherapy and arthritis*

### Self-help and daily living

- *Everyday living and arthritis*
- *Fatigue and arthritis*
- *Keep moving*
- *Looking after your joints when you have arthritis*

You can download all of our booklets and leaflets from our website or order them by contacting:

### Arthritis Research UK

PO Box 177  
Chesterfield  
Derbyshire S41 7TQ  
Phone: 0300 790 0400  
[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

## Arthritis Research UK

### Work and arthritis

**The following organisations may also be able to provide additional advice and information:**

#### **Arthritis Care**

18 Stephenson Way  
London NW1 2HD  
Phone: 020 7380 6500  
Helpline: 0808 800 4050  
[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)  
Offers self-help support, a helpline service (on both numbers above), and a range of leaflets on arthritis.

**Benefit Enquiry Line** – for people with disabilities (run by Department for Work and Pensions)

Phone: 0800 882 200 BEL-Customer-Services@dwp.gsi.gov.uk  
[www.direct.gov.uk/disability-money](http://www.direct.gov.uk/disability-money)

#### **Citizens Advice Bureau**

Information regarding employment issues may be obtained by requesting to see an employment solicitor at your local Citizens Advice Bureau. To find your local office, see the telephone directory or Yellow Pages under 'Citizens Advice Bureau' or contact Citizens Advice:

Phone: 020 7833 2181  
[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)  
Online CAB advice  
[www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk)

#### **Disability Alliance**

Universal House, 88–94 Wentworth Street  
London E1 7SA  
Phone: 020 7247 8776  
[www.disabilityalliance.org](http://www.disabilityalliance.org)  
Produces the Disability Rights Handbook, a detailed and comprehensive guide to what benefits and services are available to people with disabilities and their carers.

#### **Disability Now**

6 Market Road, London N7 9PW  
Phone: 020 7619 7323  
[www.disabilitynow.org.uk](http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk)  
*Disability Now* is a campaigning paper available as a fortnightly printed newspaper and on its website.  
<http://archive.disabilitynow.org.uk/newslettersubscribe.htm>

#### **Equality and Human Rights Commission Helpline** [England Office]

Freepost RRLG-GHUX/CTR  
Arndale House, Arndale Centre  
Manchester M4 3EQ  
Phone: 0845 604 6610 (England);  
0845 604 5510 (Scotland);  
0845 604 8810 (Wales)  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

### **Jobcentre Plus**

To find your local office see the telephone directory under 'Jobcentre Plus' or visit [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)

Jobcentre Plus is part of the Department of Work and Pensions and is the contact point for Disability Employment Advisers. Its leaflets include 'A Guide for Disabled People, Those with Health Conditions, and Carers'.

### **Leonard Cheshire Disability**

66 South Lambeth Road,  
London, SW8 1RL

Phone: 020 3242 0200

[www.lcdisability.org](http://www.lcdisability.org)

Can help provide unemployed disabled people with the skills and support needed to gain access to training and employment.

### **NRAS (National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society)**

Unit B4 Westacott Business Centre,  
Westacott Way, Littlewick Green,  
Maidenhead SL6 3RT

Phone: 0845 458 3969

Helpline: 0800 298 7650

[www.nras.org.uk](http://www.nras.org.uk)

A national charity which focuses specifically on rheumatoid arthritis.





## We're here to help

Arthritis Research UK is the charity leading the fight against arthritis.

We're the UK's fourth largest medical research charity and fund scientific and medical research into all types of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions.

We're working to take the pain away for sufferers with all forms of arthritis and helping people to remain active. We'll do this by funding high-quality research, providing information and campaigning.

Everything we do is underpinned by research.

We publish over 60 information booklets which help people affected by arthritis to understand more about the condition, its treatment, therapies and how to help themselves.

We also produce a range of separate leaflets on many of the drugs used for arthritis and related conditions. We recommend that you read the relevant leaflet for more detailed information about your medication.

Please also let us know if you'd like to receive our quarterly magazine, Arthritis Today, which keeps you up to date with current research and education news, highlighting key

projects that we're funding and giving insight into the latest treatment and self-help available.

We often feature case studies and have regular columns for questions and answers, as well as readers' hints and tips for managing arthritis.

### Tell us what you think of our booklet

Please send your views to:  
**feedback@arthritisresearchuk.org**  
or write to us at:  
Arthritis Research UK, PO Box 177,  
Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 7TQ.

A team of people contributed to this booklet. The original text was written by Brett Barratt and Maggie McArthur, who have expertise in the subject. It was assessed at draft stage by rheumatology nurse specialist Kanta Kumar and rheumatology occupational therapist and research assistant Lucy Reeve. An **Arthritis Research UK** editor revised the text to make it easy to read, and a non-medical panel, including interested societies, checked it for understanding. An **Arthritis Research UK** medical advisor, Angela Jacklin, is responsible for the content overall.

## Get involved

You can help to take the pain away from millions of people in the UK by:

- Volunteering
- Supporting our campaigns
- Taking part in a fundraising event
- Making a donation
- Asking your company to support us
- Buying gifts from our catalogue

To get more **actively involved**, please call us **0300 790 0400** or e-mail us at [enquiries@arthritisresearchuk.org](mailto:enquiries@arthritisresearchuk.org)

**Or go to:**  
[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

# Arthritis Research UK

Providing answers today and tomorrow

## **Arthritis Research UK**

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calls charged at standard rate

**[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)**

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