

Arthritis In the Workplace

Arthritis is the leading cause of disability in Canada, yet it often goes unnoticed by employers. Pamela Cole highlights the challenges faced by arthritis sufferers and offers some solutions on how to manage at work.

Arthritis is the number one cause of long-term disability in Canada. More than four million Canadians, about 600,000 in B.C., live with this painful and debilitating disease.

People with arthritis are affected at work regardless of their job – from those who work in offices or manufacturing plants, to people who work outdoors or in retail. Arthritis can significantly impact career aspirations and is one of the leading causes of physical disability among adults in Canada.

If it helps to put things into perspective, consider this – of the more than four million people in Canada with arthritis, most are of working age and in their career prime – between the ages of 20 to 64.

According to a national study of arthritis in the workplace, Canadians with arthritis are giving up breaks to complete tasks, sacrificing sick days, and taking vacation time to recuperate at home in order to continue working.

There's a lot of variability, but some participants have said that the psychological stress caused by trying to cope with arthritis and work can actually contribute to their illness said Monique Gignac, Ph.D., Scientist, Division of Outcomes & Population Health, The Toronto Western Research Institute, The University

Health Network. Gignac is leading the research project entitled, Arthritis & Employment.

Dr. Diane Lacaille, a rheumatologist and researcher with the Arthritis Research Centre of Canada in Vancouver is an expert in the field of employment and arthritis. She has developed the first comprehensive program specifically designed to prevent Work Disability (WD) in employed people with inflammatory arthritis, such as RA. The program enhances self-management of problems encountered at work due to arthritis and modifies risk factors for WD. The program was pilot tested and showed promising results. It resulted in concrete changes and improved self-confidence and self-rated productivity at work. Next, she plans to test the program's effectiveness at reducing WD in a randomized controlled trial. By preventing WD, this research will reduce the tremendous economic and social burden of RA.

Accessible and supportive workplaces are an important factor in determining whether a person with arthritis can continue working. Employers can be proactive in working with their employees who live with arthritis by offering understanding, flexibility and arthritis-friendly tools to make day-to-day workplace tasks more manageable.

What You Can Do at Work...

There are a number of simple steps that can be taken by you and your employer to help you live with your arthritis at work. And remember, it's important to take care of yourself through regular exercise, a healthy diet and a balanced lifestyle.

Planning

- If you know you have an important event coming up at work, make sure you rest at home before you need to use your energy.
- Organize your work-space so that commonly used items are within reach.
- If you sit at a desk and use a computer, make sure your chair is within a comfortable distance from the computer and that your elbows are in a relaxed 90 degree angle to the keyboard.
- Make sure your computer doesn't give off glare - a monitor filter is a great suggestion to reduce glare.
- Try to stand square to your workstation so you're not bending or twisting.
- Use a step stool to reach for items on high shelves.
- If you have to stand for a long period of time stand on rubber matting or anti-fatigue matting.

Pacing

- Work at a moderate, reasonable pace.
- Perform important duties during the time you feel most energetic.
- Alternate duties to prevent strain on certain muscle groups/joints and alternate between standing, sitting and walking.
- Take breaks and, get moving!
- It's also a great idea to get out of your work environment for a break.
- If you have access to flex-time at work (working different hours) use it if you find it helps. Sometimes working earlier or later in the day may be an option for you.
- TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.
- Remember the old adage, "work to live don't live to work". Make sure you make time for you and your family!

For more information, please visit The Arthritis Society, BC and Yukon Division's website at www.arthritis.ca/bc or phone the Arthritis Answers Line at 1.800.321.1433