

CONSIDERING WHETHER TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT ARTHRITIS AT WORK

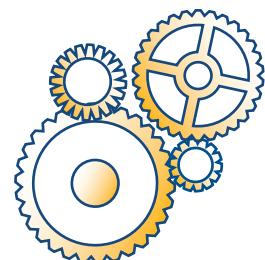
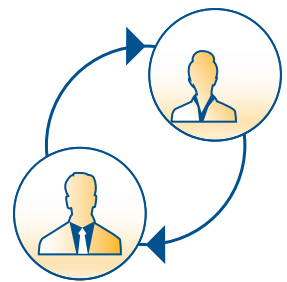


Considering Whether to Start a Conversation about Arthritis at Work is a tool to help employees think through the communication process as it relates to their particular situation and needs. The tool identifies issues for employees to consider when making a decision about whether to communicate any health needs at work, but does not provide answers or recommend a particular course of action for any individual. The information provided is for educational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice. If you require legal advice, please contact an appropriate legal professional.

Only you will be able to make the decision about whether or not to speak to your employer about your arthritis. Depending on the type of arthritis and severity of symptoms, some people find they can manage in the workplace without accommodations, while others may need additional support. However, an employer won't be able to provide accommodations unless they are aware of your needs. Many employees wait until they have significant challenges before disclosing their arthritis, though some take a more proactive approach and choose to disclose before their work is impacted.

This tool is intended to help you think through some of the key considerations to take into account when deciding whether to disclose your arthritis early, wait until symptoms become more severe, or to not say anything at all. The decision is up to you - you are not required to communicate your limitations or your condition to your employer, though in some situations, it might be beneficial. If you do decide to say something, you don't need to tell anyone your diagnosis or disease symptoms, just your limitations related to your job tasks. For employees with a disability, your employer is required to remove barriers or provide reasonable support to help you participate in employment unless the cost or other hardship to the organization is too great, or it would pose a safety risk to you or others. For more information about your rights and responsibilities, visit the section on Your Rights in the Workplace on our [employee workplace portal](#).

The following questions are designed to help you think about your arthritis and its impact on your job. Please complete all of the questions to help you think more about the decision that's best for you. This information is for you only. You don't need to share it with anyone.



SYMPTOMS

1. Over the past four months, how would you describe the severity of your arthritis symptoms like pain, stiffness, fatigue or other symptoms?

A. Mild

B. Moderate

C. Severe

2. Over the past four months, how much has your arthritis impacted your ability to do your work?

A. A little

B. A moderate amount

C. A significant amount

3. Over the past four months, have your arthritis symptoms....?

A. Gotten better

B. Stayed the same

C. Gotten worse

4. How noticeable is the impact of your arthritis to your boss and co-workers?

A. Not noticeable

B. Somewhat noticeable

C. Very noticeable

5. Would your safety or the safety of others be at risk if you **don't** disclose?

A. No

B. Don't know

C. Yes

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY A'S

If your arthritis symptoms are currently mild, and you're able to manage at work without accommodations and without posing any safety risks, it may not be necessary to communicate any information about your condition now. However, some people may choose to disclose proactively before their symptoms worsen and start to affect their performance, or if their symptoms could eventually pose a safety risk.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY B'S

If your arthritis symptoms are currently moderate and relatively stable, there may be some benefits in thinking about ways you could modify or change how you carry out your job tasks to help you better manage your condition at work. There may also be some benefits in discussing your work limitations with your employer. If your symptoms are starting to impact your work, your co-workers or manager may begin to notice. Having an explanation could be helpful and could lead to additional support. However, there are other factors to take into consideration, as this tool outlines. If your arthritis is currently under control and you're able to work well, you might decide to keep it private for the time being, unless you feel that not disclosing might pose a safety risk to yourself or others.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY C'S

If your arthritis symptoms are currently severe or getting worse, they are likely having an impact on your work. Sharing some information about your work limitations with others could lead to greater understanding and help you get the support you need. Your co-workers and supervisor or manager might begin to notice a decline in your performance and providing an explanation can help limit guessing as well as doubts about your work ethic or skills and abilities. Additionally, if your symptoms pose a safety risk, it may be important to take the next steps of disclosure. However, there are other factors to take into consideration as well, as this tool outlines. If the potential consequences of communicating your work limitations might be worse than trying to manage on your own for now, you might decide to keep it private for the time being. Some organizations provide ways to confidentially learn about workplace supports and accommodations such as an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP). It might be helpful to check your organization's policies and procedures to learn more.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

6. Which of the following best describes your employment status?

- A. Permanent B. Contract C. Seasonal

7. Which of the following best describes your type of employment?

- A. Full-time B. Part-Time C. Occasional/Casual

8. Are you currently a member of an employee benefits plan through your employer?

- A. Yes, with full benefits B. Yes, with partial benefits C. No

9. Is your position unionized?

- A. Yes B. Don't Know C. No

10. How long have you worked at your current place of employment?

- A. More than 3 years B. 1-3 years C. 12 months or less

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY A'S

If you are in a fairly stable role with some job security and/or benefits, there may be more support available for you due to your condition as compared to someone in a less secure position. Unions can help employees advocate for their rights and benefit plans may help cover important treatments as well as a short- or long-term absence from work if required. While there may still be risks to sharing information, having some stability and seniority can act in your favour. Only you will be able to assess the risks versus the benefits of disclosure for your unique situation and your comfort level with sharing information with others. If you have access to a union representative or employee assistance program, you might choose to talk to them about your work limitations first before deciding whether to disclose to your manager or human resources department.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY B'S

If you are in a less stable role, you may have limited job security and benefits. This means you may have less support available if you choose to share information about your work limitations as compared to someone in a more secure position. If you are in a union, it can help employees advocate for their rights. Benefit plans may help cover important treatments as well as a short- or long-term absence from work if required. There may be some risks to sharing information if you lack seniority and/or permanency in your organization. Only you will be able to assess the risks versus the benefits of disclosure for your unique situation. If you have access to a union representative or employee assistance program, you might choose to talk to them about your work limitations first before deciding whether to disclose to your employer. It also may be helpful to learn more about tips and strategies for self-managing your condition where possible. The [Arthritis Society's online learning modules](#) can help you better manage your symptoms and take control over your arthritis.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY C'S

If you are casually or seasonally employed or in an unstable position, you may not have access to benefits or job security. This means you may be in a more vulnerable position if you do choose to share information as compared to someone in a more secure, longer-term and/or permanent position. There could be increased risks to disclosure, especially without the support of unions or benefit plans if you require absence from work or support for symptom management, such as medication. At the same time, many employers recognize the valuable skills their workers bring to the job and are prepared to work with them to provide some support. Only you will be able to assess the risks versus the benefits of sharing information about your unique health and work situation. On the one hand, requesting accommodations might help you stay productive in your role and maintain employment. On the other hand, if the potential consequences of disclosing your condition and support needs might be worse than trying to manage on your own for now, you might decide to keep it private for the time being.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTS

11. Does your workplace have an accommodation policy and process in place?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

12. Does your workplace have a diversity policy that upholds the rights of employees with disabilities?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

13. Does your workplace have a Human Resources (HR) department?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

14. Does your workplace have an Accessibility Consultant/Disability Manager?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

15. Does your workplace have any policies, programs, mentorship or skills building opportunities for employees with disabilities?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY A'S

If your workplace has policies and structures in place to accommodate people with disabilities, you might have a lower risk of communicating some information about your limitations at work. Accommodation policies describe the process for accommodation, allowing you to follow a pre-determined process to disclose your limitations or condition. A Human Resources department, accessibility consultant, or disability manager can also be helpful in advising about a safe and effective communication process. They can provide information to you on your rights and responsibilities, provide details about how your privacy will be protected, and information about specific programs and policies that are aimed at supporting or accommodating workers. You may wish to request a confidential meeting to learn more about these policies before you share personal information with anyone in your organization. The information provided can help you think about the decision that works best for you. However, even though policies and processes may be in place, this doesn't necessarily mean that every organization will be able to apply them to all job situations. You will need to weigh the different factors and risks to consider.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY B'S

If you are not sure whether your workplace has policies and structures in place to accommodate people with disabilities, check your organization's website, internal network (or intranet), employee handbook and/or existing company policies. Accommodation and diversity policies may describe the process for disclosure and accommodation, allowing you to follow a pre-determined process to disclose your condition. A Human Resources department, accessibility consultant, or disability manager can also be helpful in advising about a safe and effective communication process. They can provide information to you on your rights and responsibilities, provide details about how your privacy will be protected, and information about specific programs and policies that are aimed at supporting or accommodating workers. You may wish to request a confidential meeting to learn more about these policies before you share personal information with anyone in your organization. If this information is not readily available, or simply does not exist, the potential outcomes of disclosure may be less clear. However, a lack of organizational supports doesn't necessarily mean higher risks associated with disclosure. Some smaller workplaces have a very supportive working environment that might make sharing information easy, while others can pose barriers. Again, it is up to you to weigh the different factors to consider.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY C'S

If your workplace lacks the policies and structures in place to accommodate people with disabilities, the potential outcomes of disclosure may be less clear. Accommodation policies are often put in place to describe the process for accommodation, but if these are absent you may not have a pre-determined path to share information about your work limitations. A Human Resources department, accessibility consultant, or disability manager can be helpful in advising about a safe and effective communication process. They can provide information to you on your rights and responsibilities, provide details about how your privacy will be protected, and information about specific programs and policies that are aimed at supporting or accommodating workers. You may wish to request a confidential meeting to learn more about these policies before you share personal information with anyone in your organization. However, some organizations lack easy access to these individuals, which could potentially create a barrier to a safe and effective communication process. If your workplace has no supports for employees with disabilities, such as programs, mentorship or training opportunities, then it might be difficult to assess how successful your disclosure could be. At the same time, a lack of organizational supports doesn't necessarily mean higher risks associated with disclosure. Some smaller workplaces have a very supportive working environment that might make sharing information easy, while others can pose barriers. Again, it is up to you to weigh the different factors to consider.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

16. Does your workplace have a history of successfully accommodating employees with disabilities or chronic health conditions?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

17. Does your workplace have a history of treating other employees well when they have disclosed limitations due to a disability or health condition?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

18. Have you experienced discrimination in your workplace, either related to your arthritis or to another part of your identity?

A. No

B. Don't Know

C. Yes

19. Do you have a supportive and respectful relationship with your supervisor or manager?

A. Yes

B. I'm Not Sure

C. No

20. Do you have a supportive and respectful relationship with your co-workers?

A. Yes

B. I'm Not Sure

C. No

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY A'S

If your organization has been supportive of other employees with disabilities/chronic health conditions in the past, this might be a sign of how it approaches those who communicate personal information in general (though not always). Having supportive and respectful relationships with your supervisor or manager and your co-workers can allow you to feel more comfortable about what you communicate in the workplace, whether it is just your workplace limitations or more information about your health. A diverse, inclusive workplace might be more accepting of differences in abilities than a discriminatory workplace. However, even if you haven't personally experienced any forms of discrimination at work, other people may still face barriers. A positive workplace culture could mean greater support for employees with arthritis, but you will need to keep in mind your unique circumstances when making the decision whether or not to communicate any health needs.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY B'S

If you don't know how other employees have been treated after sharing their limitations or conditions, it may be difficult to anticipate how any sharing of information from you will be received. In addition, if you're not sure whether you have a supportive and respectful relationship with your supervisor or manager or your co-workers, you may not feel totally comfortable communicating about your work limitations or be able to anticipate how others will react. A diverse, inclusive workplace might be more accepting of differences in abilities than a discriminatory workplace. However, even if you're not sure whether you've experienced stigma or discrimination in the workplace, other people may still face barriers. Be mindful of your unique circumstances when making the decision to disclose and consider the possible benefits and risks.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY C'S

If other employees have been treated poorly or haven't been accommodated after disclosing their limitations or condition, this may be a sign of your organization's general approach to those who communicate personal information. In addition, if you lack a supportive and respectful relationship with your supervisor or manager and co-workers, you may encounter challenges if you choose to communicate any limitations that could affect your work. If you believe you've experienced discrimination at work and have supports through your organization, like a Human Resources department, union representative or Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you might want to discuss your experiences before making a decision whether or not to communicate information about your health. If you don't have these supports in place, take time to weigh out the benefits and risks when deciding whether or not to share information. If your employer fails to accommodate you up to the point of undue hardship or if you experience discrimination in the workplace, you may have recourse to legal action under Canadian and provincial/territorial human rights legislation. This could be a factor to consider in deciding whether or not to share information along with considering your capacity or willingness to pursue legal action if you believe that your employer is not following the law.

DISCLOSURE & ACCOMMODATIONS

21. Do you feel that disclosing your limitations or condition might put your job at risk?

A. No

B. Don't Know

C. Yes

22. Do you feel that keeping quiet about your condition might put your job at risk? (i.e. if your performance is suffering and your employer doesn't know why)

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

23. At this point, do you require accommodations for your arthritis to be able to succeed at work?

A. Yes

B. Don't Know

C. No

24. Would receiving accommodations potentially cause tension with your co-workers?

A. No

B. Don't Know

C. Yes

25. Would receiving accommodations significantly shift your role or responsibilities?

A. No

B. Don't Know

C. Yes

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY A'S

As this tool indicates, sharing personal health needs can carry different risks for each individual based on the severity of one's condition, status of employment, policies and structures in place and the culture of an organization. If you don't anticipate negative consequences from communicating and/or if you think your job might be at risk if you say nothing, it may be helpful to you to try to gain workplace support or accommodations. You will need to weigh the possible benefits against the potential risks to you and your organization. Communicating information about your needs may be a necessity for the success of your role or you may be able to choose whether or not to disclose in your current situation with the option to communicate in the future. Laws exist to protect you from discrimination and protect your right to accommodation to the point of undue hardship.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY B'S

As this tool indicates, sharing personal health needs can carry different risks for each individual based on the severity of one's condition, status of employment, policies and structures in place and the culture of an organization. In addition to these factors, it's important to think about the potential consequences of disclosure and whether saying nothing might pose a greater risk to you or others. Laws exist to protect you from discrimination and protect your right to accommodation to the point of undue hardship. However, sometimes workers and employers don't agree on the interpretation of the law or how it should be implemented in a particular case. It may be helpful to you to pursue accommodation even if it means legal action, or you may feel that the risks to you or your job don't warrant this approach. Communicating information about your needs may be a necessity for the success of your role or you may be able to choose whether or not to disclose in your current situation with the option still available in the future.

IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY C'S

As this tool indicates, sharing personal health needs can carry different risks for each individual based on the severity of one's condition, status of employment, policies and structures in place and the culture of an organization. In addition to these factors, it's important to think about the potential consequences of disclosure and whether saying nothing might pose a greater risk to you and others. Laws exist to protect you from discrimination and protect your right to accommodation to the point of undue hardship. However, sometimes workers and employers don't agree on the interpretation of the law or how it should be implemented in a particular case. It may be helpful to you to pursue accommodation even if it means legal action, or you may feel that the risks to you or your job don't warrant this approach. Communicating information about your needs may be a necessity for the success of your role or you may be able to choose whether or not to disclose in your current situation with the option still available in the future.

SUMMARY

Depending on your workplace and your particular circumstances, you might choose to communicate information about the impact of your arthritis on your ability to perform your job so that you can access support. Alternatively, you might prefer to keep your personal health information private, especially if it doesn't impact your job or you're able to manage your work without the involvement of others. When deciding on whether or not to request accommodations, you will want to take into consideration how this will affect your role and relationships, and ultimately, the larger impact on your quality of life. The decision is up to you. It's important to weigh the benefits of communicating against the risks and keep in mind the factors discussed in this tool: the severity of your symptoms, the status of your employment, and the structure, policies and culture of your organization. Educate yourself on your rights and responsibilities and the rights and responsibilities of your employer.

Many organizations have a variety of policies and practices already in place to support their workers living with a disability. Remember, if you choose to communicate some information about your health or its impact, you are not required to disclose your specific diagnosis (i.e. arthritis) but may be asked to provide a note from a healthcare professional confirming your functional limitations (i.e. unable to stand for long periods of time). Employers have a duty to accommodate a disability to the point of undue hardship, but they aren't required to use a particular accommodation if they believe another accommodation can achieve the same results. Employers are also not required to accommodate an employee if doing so would pose a risk to the health or safety of the employee or others or if it would represent an excessive cost or other hardship to the organization. If you've decided to share information about your limitations living with arthritis at your work, check out our [Arthritis and Work employee portal](#) for more information.

Considering Whether To Start A Conversation About Arthritis At Work Tool was developed in collaboration with the ACED Partnership Project, with expert advice from:

Monique A. M. Gignac, PhD, Scientific Co-Director and Senior Scientist,
Institute for Work & Health Professor, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

SOURCES

1. Accommodating and Communicating about Episodic Disabilities (ACED): A partnership to deliver workplace resources to sustain employment of people with chronic, episodic conditions, 2018: <https://aced.iwh.on.ca>.
2. Arthritis Society, Arthritis and Work, 2019: <https://arthritis.ca/support-education/online-learning/arthritis-and-work>
3. Government of Alberta, Talking About Invisible Disabilities, 2019: <https://alis.alberta.ca/plan-your-career/additional-resources-for-specific-audiences/for-persons-with-disabilities/talking-about-invisible-disabilities/>
4. National Disability Coordination Officer Program, Disclosure: It's a Personal Decision, 2019: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/choosingyourpath/employment/educators_and_employers
5. von Schrader, S., Malzer, V. & Bruyère, S. Employ Respons Rights J (2014) 26: 237. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-013-9227-9>

THIS RESOURCE WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH EDUCATIONAL GRANTS FROM:

PFIZER, AMGEN, LILLY, MERCK, NOVARTIS, ABBVIE