



www.arthritis.org
800-283-7800

Arthritis in the Workplace

FINDING THE RIGHT CAREER

For most people – with or without a form of arthritis or an arthritis-related condition – choosing a career is not easy. It is usually a complex process that involves matching your skills and desires with the realities of the business world.

You know your own abilities and limitations. It is important to be practical – but not unrealistic – about what you can and cannot do. Take control of your arthritis instead of allowing arthritis to take control of you.

A Physical Checklist

Begin your search for the right job by assessing your physical capabilities. How much standing, walking, sitting, lifting and reaching are you comfortable doing? What is your fatigue level? Can you hold objects or open car doors easily? Are you able to perform repetitive hand movements without aggravating your arthritis?

Consider your abilities on both “good” and “bad” days in making these judgments.

If the job you are interested in requires you to do activities you find difficult, you have two choices: Try to find ways to do the job comfortably, or make the decision to find a job that is right for you.

Think Smart

It’s helpful to make a detailed list of the activities that may be involved in an occupation you’re considering. Next to each activity, write how your particular condition might affect your ability to perform the task. Then consider possible modifications that would enable you to do the job efficiently and with as little pain and fatigue as possible. If that is not possible, think about other jobs in the same field that would interest you but perhaps be easier to perform.

You may want to seek help from an occupational therapist – a health professional trained

to help people reach their maximum level of function and independence in daily life. Ask your therapist to help you figure out the physical skills involved in specific jobs and what equipment or adaptations are available to help you do the job more easily, so you can make informed decisions.

HOW TO START YOUR JOB SEARCH

Finding a job requires resourcefulness, commitment, energy and persistence. Give yourself time to work on your job search. Today most people have numerous job interviews before they receive a job offer. You can improve your chances of success by pursuing several job leads at the same time. Remember, employers are always looking for creative, enthusiastic employees.

Here are some suggestions for conducting an effective job search:

- List your strengths and weaknesses (including your interests, your physical abilities, your personality traits, and your communication and socialization skills), your vocational skills, and any limitations you have due to arthritis.
- Identify career fields that interest you. If you are confused about this or can't make up your mind, career counseling may help to identify your strengths and suggest possible careers. Universities and colleges typically provide this type of service.
- List your career or job goals (position responsibilities, job progression, etc.).
- Note any additional training, education or experience you may need to qualify for the jobs that interest you.
- Discuss your career choices with your physician to be sure they are compatible with your arthritis. Stress, fatigue and physical endurance are all factors to consider.
- Describe in detail the working conditions that would best meet your needs, especially the ability to control the pace of work.
- Consider the type of company for which you'd like to work. Smaller organizations often can offer employees the opportunity to gain broad experience. Larger companies often have better health insurance plans and other benefits.
- Put together a well-organized, attractive resume that describes your education, work history and skills. Revise your resume if you want to target a specific job or if the resume seems to be meeting with too many rejections. Your local public library will have books on how to write a resume and prepare for interviews.
- Attend professional organization or club meetings and seminars to network with as many people as possible in your area of interest.
- Practice your interviewing skills. Ask colleagues and friends to help you conduct mock interviews.
- Stay organized. Keep track of job leads, employment contacts, resumes sent, contacts seen and appointments.
- Know your legal rights in the hiring process.
- Decide ahead of time how and when to discuss any arthritis-related limitations and needs with employers.
- Congratulate yourself each time you complete a step in your job search.
- Celebrate when you get the job – but remember to keep your job skills up-to-date with new technologies.

HOW TO FIND JOB OPPORTUNITIES

There are many different ways to find job opportunities. One of the most effective ways is networking – developing contacts and exchanging

ing information in order to advance your career or job search.

One way to network is to tell everyone you know about your career and job interests as well as your skills and abilities. These people include family, friends, previous employers and instructors, neighbors, volunteers and committee members with whom you have worked, professionals (physicians, lawyers, accountants), members of your religious organization, college alumni office personnel, and casual acquaintances.

Give them copies of your resume. Ask them to review it, to check the job openings at their companies, and to refer or introduce you to other contacts.

You can establish additional contacts by trying some of the following suggestions:

- Join a professional organization related to your field of employment and/or attend meetings or workshops that it sponsors.
- Take a refresher course in your chosen field at a local community college.
- Join a civic association.
- Try calling companies in which you are interested to learn what hiring plans they have, even if they have no officially advertised positions.
- Use the Internet as a resource for job opportunities across the country. Check your local library or community college for information on how to find job openings through the Internet, or try some of the sites listed above.
- Attend job fairs held in your area.
- Seek out informational interviews with people who have jobs you're interested in.
- Follow up on all leads. Always send thank-you notes after every interview and informational interview.

Internet Job Sites

You can access thousands of job openings on the Internet if you know where to find them. These sites are a good starting point, but check your local library for a more complete list.

www.jobtrack.com

www.career.com

www.monster.com

www.careerweb.com

www.careerpath.com

www.bestjobsusa.com

Read newspaper classified ads as well as business and trade publications. Your local library will have information about careers and employers in your area.

State and federal employment centers and your state's vocational rehabilitation office offer job search services. Employment specialists at independent living centers may be able to refer you to vocational programs in your area. Some larger companies may offer work experience programs for people with disabilities.

LAWS THAT CAN HELP YOU

Federal laws have helped to level the playing field for people with arthritis and other conditions in their effort to find and keep employment. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and its predecessor, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, provide important protections to workers in the private sector and all levels of government. The Family and Medical Leave Act allows workers to take up to 12 weeks unpaid leave when ill.

Your state may also have laws that protect people with disabilities from discrimination.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is the most extensive bill of rights for people with disabilities ever signed into law. It bans hiring, employment and other types of discrimination against people with disabilities. At the same time, it protects employers from having to make changes that are unreasonable or very expensive. Companies with 15 or fewer employees do not have to comply with the regulations.

You should know what an employer can and cannot ask about your condition during the job selection process or once you've been hired. The following guidelines are explained in the ADA:

- An employer cannot ask if you have a disability or how severe it is.
- An employer can ask you if you are able to perform essential duties of the job.
- If you have an obvious physical disability, the employer can ask how you would perform your duties and whether you need a modification (an accommodation) to help you do them. You can be asked to demonstrate how you would perform the tasks.
- If accommodations are needed, the employer cannot pay you less to cover the cost or ask you to pay for them. If providing the accommodation would be an undue hardship, the employer must give you the choice of providing it yourself or paying for a share of it.
- The employer cannot ask you to have a medical examination before offering you the job. After offering you the job, the employer may ask you to have an examination if all employees in that position are required to do so. Your medical records must be kept confidential.

- An employer must offer you the same health insurance benefits offered to other employees. For this reason, employers can offer health insurance policies that do not cover pre-existing conditions like arthritis. Employers do not have to offer you extra benefits to cover your particular medical condition.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (also known as the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill), which went into effect in July 1997, protects health insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, even if you lose or change jobs. This bill ensures that if you have health insurance coverage at one job, you will be able to obtain coverage at future jobs where health insurance is offered. Your new employer cannot exclude you from health-care coverage because you or a member of your family have a pre-existing condition.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the model for the ADA and contains many of the same protections for people with disabilities. It applies to the federal government and all its agencies, to companies that do business with the federal government, and to institutions that receive federal financial assistance.

WHAT EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR

Whether you have a disability or not, you will be more attractive to any employer if you:

- Meet all the job qualifications.
- Convey a sense of drive, confidence, enthusiasm and commitment.
- Portray an honest, loyal and reliable image.
- Appear to be someone who can “fit in” (become familiar with company customs, follow company rules, and get along well with others).

- Seem able to learn new skills quickly and are able to contribute to the company's success in terms of high-quality work and productivity.

WHEN YOU SHOULD TELL ABOUT ARTHRITIS

In order to make the most of every employment opportunity, carefully consider if and when to tell an employer about your disease and how it affects you.

An arthritis-related disease could be an asset if you know a company has a strong commitment to hiring people with disabilities. It could also be an asset if the position requires someone who understands the effects of chronic disease.

In most cases, however, arthritis or a related disease is likely to raise questions in an employer's mind about your ability to do the job. You can speak to your employer about your condition at any stage of the interviewing and hiring process. Once you decide to approach the subject, wait until the circumstances are most favorable before you bring it up.

The ADA has made it much easier for people with arthritis and related diseases – especially those whose disabilities are not obvious – to be open with employers about their disease and their needs. Still, many people are reluctant to talk about their condition. Some fear that potential employers will immediately rule them out as good job candidates. Some worry that employers will not wish to hire a person with potentially high medical bills. Others are concerned that telling may hurt their chances of promotion.

Remember, however, that employers do not have to make changes in the workplace as required by the ADA if they do not know of your disability. In addition, tension caused by lack of support in the workplace could aggravate your symptoms.

Your decision about whether to tell could be based on three things – whether your disability is obvious, whether you need special accommodations in order to do the job, and the effort it will require to keep your arthritis hidden.

Depending on your answers to these considerations, you may choose to remain silent about your arthritis. If you do not feel comfortable remaining silent, you will have to decide how and when to tell your employer and co-workers about your arthritis.

DEALING WITH WORK RELATIONSHIPS

Co-workers who don't know about your arthritis can become resentful if they feel you are not doing your share of the work. They may get annoyed if they are often asked to help out or to make up for you when you miss work if they do not know the reason.

Even people who do know about your arthritis may think of it as “just aches and pains.” Arthritis and related conditions are often “invisible” diseases, which makes them more difficult to explain. Co-workers may feel you are getting special treatment you don't deserve. These attitudes can trigger anger on both sides.

You may worry that you will be treated differently or denied opportunities if people know you have arthritis. You may be tempted to ignore your body's warnings or may work extra hard to cover up the fact that you have arthritis.

Plan carefully how and when to discuss your arthritis with co-workers or supervisors. Education can help change their perceptions and expectations of people with arthritis. Begin by researching all the changes that could make your job as productive as possible.

Schedule a meeting with your supervisor at a time when neither of you is under pressure. It

may also be helpful to talk informally with your co-workers or a member of the personnel department about ways to make the discussion go more smoothly.

In the meeting, describe as simply as possible the ways arthritis may affect your work. Make it plain that you are not looking for sympathy, but for ways to resolve the problem that will benefit the company, your co-workers and yourself. The goal of this meeting should be to generate a supportive atmosphere in which everyone works together as part of a team.

Be prepared to help your employer react favorably to your condition. You are the expert on what you need to work efficiently. Be prepared to offer suggestions for possible changes, based on the research you did before the meeting. Chances are any changes you may need will not cost much. In fact, tax deductions and/or tax credits may be available to certain employers who provide accommodations and/or jobs for people with disabilities.

Know as much as possible about the ADA, items you may need to help you do your job more easily, the costs of these items – called assistive devices – and resources to help your employer.

WORKING SUCCESSFULLY WITH ARTHRITIS

Working successfully depends greatly on having proper management of your disease. This includes care from an experienced doctor, working with your health-care team to plan a treatment program of proper medication, exercise and self-management skills.

Being flexible and creative can help you balance work responsibilities with the demands of arthritis. By figuring out your energy patterns during the day and what kind of activities hurt

or help you, you can arrange your work schedule to keep arthritis under control.

To be flexible, try to:

- Maintain a positive attitude.
- Maintain a schedule. Go to bed at a regular time and get enough rest to carry you through the next day.
- Create an efficient work environment. Arrange your area to limit the amount of lifting, reaching, carrying, holding or walking necessary.
- Vary activities periodically to avoid sitting in one position or doing too much repetitive activity for too long.
- Set priorities and pace yourself.

Working Safely

Finding ways to modify or eliminate activities that place extra stress on your joints can prevent disability and help you remain active in the workforce longer.

Ways of doing this include:

- practicing joint protection
- learning exercise and relaxation techniques
- conserving your energy and pacing yourself
- making travel to and from work easier

JOINT PROTECTION

There are many ways to protect your joints from further pain, strain and inflammation. A few tips to use in the workplace include:

- Respect pain. If an activity consistently causes pain, try to stop or at least modify it. Find other ways to do tasks that will make them less painful.
- Cut out unnecessary movements. Find the most comfortable position for using the machines or equipment that you operate and make sure everything is in easy reach.

- Use assistive devices when possible. Wrist splints can help take pressure off your wrists and hands, particularly if you work with your hands for long periods of time. Other pieces of equipment that can reduce pressure on your joints include a computer or light-touch electric typewriter, an electric stapler, enlarged grips on your pens and dictating equipment (to avoid additional writing).
- Arrange your computer to reduce stress on your neck, shoulders and hands. Use wrist rests or arm rests to help with proper posture.
- Change positions often. If you cannot avoid tasks that use repetitive movements, rest your joints by changing positions every 20 to 30 minutes.
- Take frequent, short breaks. Stand and stretch every 30 to 60 minutes when you sit for long periods. Sit on a tall stool, lean against a wall, or prop one foot on a footstool to rest your back and legs when standing.

EXERCISE

Exercise is very important for relieving the pain and stiffness of arthritis. Your doctor and a physical therapist can design a complete exercise program to help keep you moving safely.

Range-of-motion exercises reduce stiffness and help keep your joints flexible – something that can help you with regular daily activities. The “range of motion” is the normal distance your joints can move in certain directions.

Strengthening exercises help maintain or increase muscle strength, which helps keep your joints stable and more comfortable. Knowing which muscles need to be strengthened and how to perform the exercises without overstressing the joints are key elements in a successful strengthening program.

Endurance exercises strengthen your heart, help your lungs work more efficiently, and give you more stamina. They also help you sleep better and control your weight. Water exercise, walking and stationary cycling are usually good exercises for stiff, sore joints.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Tension on the job often aggravates pain, while pain from arthritis can easily add to the tension. Relaxation techniques help release tension, relax joints and muscles, and restore energy. Everyone, especially people with arthritis, can benefit from relaxation exercises. Consider trying some of these relaxation techniques while at work, or talk to your health-care team about others to try:

- Sit quietly and practice deep breathing.
- Go for a leisurely walk outside.
- Listen to the birds outside.
- Let your mind wander to a pleasant event.
- Listen to relaxing music.

ENERGY CONSERVATION

Arthritis often causes fatigue, and so it is important to not waste your energy on unimportant tasks or use it all up in one burst of activity that leaves you too tired to do anything else. This may mean picking and choosing which activities you do on a given day.

Some ways to conserve energy are:

- Pay attention to your energy pattern throughout the day and plan your activities accordingly. Do your most difficult activities at the time of day you feel your best.
- Exchange tasks with a co-worker. Ask others to do tasks that are too difficult or tiring for you; in return you can handle one of their tasks.
- Simplify your work by cutting out unnecessary activities. Think of ways to save steps.

- Pace your work. Plan your day so you can work at a steady pace. Alternate activities that require a lot of energy with easier ones, and try not to do strenuous activities for an entire day.
- Try to schedule short rest breaks every few hours if possible.

CUT DOWN ON TRAVEL HASSLES

If you have difficulty getting to and from work or walking long distances, the following suggestions may be of help.

- Consider carpooling with a co-worker or someone who works nearby.
- Consider using public transportation. Under the ADA, all public transportation is required to be accessible to people with disabilities.
- Install adaptive equipment in your car, such as back rests, steering wheel adaptations and special mirrors to make driving easier. Some car manufacturers offer rebates for installing such equipment in new cars and provide lists of companies that do the work.
- Ask your employer to provide reserved or accessible parking spaces near building entrances.
- Obtain a handicapped-accessible parking sticker or license plate for the disabled through your state transportation department so you can park closer to the building.
- If necessary, request a ramp leading to the building entrance.
- Request an office space near the entrance.

Making Your Computer Arthritis-Friendly

Many people who work in an office use a computer as an essential part of their job. Computers have made life much easier, but they can create problems for people with arthritis who sit for long periods at a time.

Take short breaks from your work to help prevent stiffness and fatigue. Stretch your arm and finger muscles before you begin working and during breaks.

Proper seating, assistive devices and clever use of all the labor-saving shortcuts your computer offers can help limit stress on your joints and increase your productivity. Try the techniques listed below, or ask your employer's computer department for other helpful tips.

SITTING PROPERLY

Keep these tips in mind when working at a computer for long periods:

- Make sure you have a comfortable chair with good low-back support and arm rests. If necessary, use a lumbar support and/or seat wedge for lower back support. Lean back slightly in your chair, making sure your lower back is against the backrest.
- Move closer to the keyboard. There should be a three- to six-inch space between your lap and the keyboard tray or desk. Your feet should be flat on the floor, with your knees at a 90- to 110-degree angle. Use a foot stool if needed.
- Position your keyboard and monitor straight in front of you. The top of the monitor should be at eye level, and your mouse should be at the same level as your keyboard.
- Position your fingers so that they touch the middle row of your keyboard. Your wrists should be straight, yet loose, and your forearms should be parallel to the floor. If they aren't, use a padded wrist rest and adjust your chair height.

USING ASSISTIVE DEVICES

Inexpensive changes can often make using the computer easier. You may be able to get funding for these devices for your personal use

through your insurer, federal or state agencies such as Medicare or vocational rehabilitation, or service organizations. Buying the equipment or assistive devices listed here may be a reasonable accommodation for your employer to make to help you do or keep your job.

- Use a split computer keyboard designed with the keys in a spread-out formation that's easier on typing hands.
- Switch to a mouse or joystick to enter commands.
- Use devices that make it easier to read the computer screen if you have vision problems.
- Wear wrist splints to support your wrists while typing.

ADJUSTING TO CHANGE

There may be a time when, despite all your best efforts, arthritis makes it impossible for you to continue in your present job.

This does not mean you will have to stop working altogether. With the help of the ADA and vocational rehabilitation services, you may be able to continue working for many years. However, you may have to change jobs, work fewer hours or consider self-employment.

If your job involves physical labor, your doctor may refer you to an occupational or physical therapist or a state vocational rehabilitation agency for a physical work performance evaluation or functional capacity evaluation. Such a test will determine exactly how much you can lift, carry, push and pull, and how well you can perform fine motor functions.

Vocational Rehabilitation

The goal of vocational rehabilitation is to help people with disabilities develop job skills and find and keep employment. Vocational

rehabilitation services vary from state to state but usually include:

- career counseling and guidance
- help in getting transportation and assistive devices such as wheelchairs
- tools, equipment, supplies and licenses needed to help you work
- job training and job placement services
- personal assistance services
- help with finding accessible housing

Vocational rehabilitation may also be provided by private nonprofit organizations such as Goodwill Industries. For information about organizations in your area, contact your local Arthritis Foundation chapter at 800/283-7800.

Work Disability

If you become disabled because of arthritis and are unable to return to work, you may be eligible for Social Security disability benefits. The Social Security Administration (www.ssa.gov)

considers you disabled if you are physically and/or psychologically unable to engage in any occupation or do any kind of work for which you are suited based on your age, education and work experience. It is important to note that you must be unable to work for a minimum of 12 months (or it is expected that you will be unable to work for that period of time).

You do not need to wait 12 months to file your claim for benefits. You could file the claim the day after you stop work. However, you still need to meet the requirement that it is expected that you will be unable to work for a minimum of 12 months.

There are two kinds of benefits: Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Both

offer specific incentives to encourage people receiving these benefits to return to work. For more information on these programs, contact your local Arthritis Foundation chapter or the Social Security Administration.

THE ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION

The mission of the Arthritis Foundation is to improve lives through leadership in the prevention, control and cure of arthritis and related diseases.

The Arthritis Foundation supports research with the greatest potential for advances and has invested more than \$320 million in these efforts since its inception in 1948. Additionally, the Arthritis Foundation supports key public policy and advocacy efforts at a local and national level in order to make a difference on behalf of 70 million people living with arthritis.

As your partner in taking greater control of arthritis, the Arthritis Foundation also offers a large number of programs and services nationwide to make life with arthritis easier and less painful and to help you become an active partner in your own health care.

Contact us at (800) 283-7800 or visit us on the Web at www.arthritis.org to become an Arthritis Advocate or to find out how you can become involved.

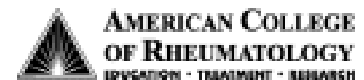
The Arthritis Foundation gratefully acknowledges Scott E. Davis, Esq., Phoenix, AZ; Pam Harrell, OTR, CHT, Arthritis and Osteoporosis Care Center, Baptist Hospital, Nashville, TN; Ann Kunkel, University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City; and Laura Robbins, DSW, Hospital for Special Surgery, New York, for their assistance with this booklet.

For more information: The Arthritis Foundation offers a wide variety of books, brochures and videos about different forms of arthritis, treatment and self-management techniques to help you take control of your arthritis. To order any of these products, become an Arthritis Foundation member or to subscribe to the Arthritis Foundation's award-winning consumer health magazine, *Arthritis Today*, call (800) 283-7800. Call or visit our Web site (www.arthritis.org) to find out how you can take control of your arthritis and start living better today!

MISSION STATEMENT:

The mission of the Arthritis Foundation is to improve lives through leadership in the prevention, control and cure of arthritis and related diseases.

This brochure has been reviewed by the AMERICAN COLLEGE OF RHEUMATOLOGY.



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