



# Conversation starters for workplace discussions about musculoskeletal disorders

An EU-OSHA resource for workplaces

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## Introduction to using conversation starters

Conversation starter scenarios are a resource to facilitate group discussions in the workplace or during vocational training. These conversation starters include scenarios that have been designed for use with workers who are involved in tasks that have the potential to cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), and their managers and supervisors, and scenarios that have been designed to support the need for prompt and effective communication between a worker and their manager about a musculoskeletal health problem. These scenarios can be used as a starting point to initiate a discussion, with suggested topics and introductory questions. They can be used in a discussion-style workshop or as an opener to a training session.

Larger groups could be divided into smaller groups, or pairs, to discuss each scenario, the topics for discussion and their points of view. The groups should then come back together to share their points of view. If the facilitator divides a larger group into smaller groups, each could be given the same scenario or they could be given different scenarios.

- The situations used are intended to highlight some of the challenges faced by workers and the importance of understanding company procedures relating to the prevention of MSDs, including which responsibilities lie with employers and which lie with workers.
- The situations can be tailored to reflect the needs of an organisation through the incorporation of its own policies and procedures relating to the prevention of MSDs.
- Through discussion, workers should feel better equipped and better informed to deal with situations in which judgement decisions are required.
- Through discussion, workers, managers and supervisors should recognise the importance of early symptom reporting in reducing the risk of workers developing MSDs and in supporting sustainable working lives.

Facilitators may also consider adapting the scenarios and questions to other jobs and work situations, maintaining the same approach.

## Further information on MSDs

At the links below you will find resources from EU-OSHA providing straightforward information about MSDs and how to prevent them, which will help you to prepare the activities; the factsheets could also be used as handouts for participants:

- *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses:*  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>
- 'Musculoskeletal disorders': <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/musculoskeletal-disorders>
- 'Factsheet 71 — Introduction to work-related musculoskeletal disorders':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/71/view>
- 'Factsheet 72 — Work-related neck and upper limb disorders':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/72/view>
- 'Factsheet 73 — Hazards and risks associated with manual handling of loads in the workplace': <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/73/view>
- 'Factsheet 87 — Workforce diversity and risk assessment: ensuring everyone is covered Summary of an Agency report: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/87/view>

- 'E-fact 19 — Prevention of vibration risks in the construction sector':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/e-facts/efact19/view>

## Further information on leadership and worker participation

- *Worker participation in occupational safety and health — a practical guide*:  
[https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/workers-participation-in-OSH\\_guide/view](https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/workers-participation-in-OSH_guide/view)
- *Management leadership in occupational safety and health — a practical guide*:  
[https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/management-leadership-in-OSH\\_guide/view](https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/management-leadership-in-OSH_guide/view)

## Additional training resources

- *Napo training resources — 'Understanding musculoskeletal disorders' toolkit*:  
<https://www.napofilm.net/en/learning-with-napo/napo-in-the-workplace/>: these conversation starters can be used in combination with various workplace discussion activities on MSDs that are designed to be used with Napo films. At the link you will find a menu that suggests how activities from the two resources can be used together.

## Conversation starter 1: Delivery driver

Working for a delivery company, you are responsible for the safe and timely delivery of packages to both domestic and commercial premises. The packages are labelled according to weight where this is required; however, for reasons of operational efficiency, the number of packages you are required to deliver daily has increased by 10 %.

Despite this increase, you really enjoy your work, but you are concerned about the impact this additional activity is having on your well-being.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Do you think that a 10 % increase in workload is likely to trigger the development of an MSD? If so, what types of MSDs might this cause and what could be done to prevent them?
- On a personal level, MSDs are painful and in many cases life limiting; what impact can they have at an organisational level and why?
- Being a delivery driver, you are exposed to the risks associated with both driving and MSDs; how would developing an MSD affect your driving?
- How would you raise your concerns with your employer? If you developed symptoms or fatigue, how would you raise these issues with your employer?
- To avoid similar situations arising in future, how can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- EU-OSHA, *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses*: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>
- Website of the Scottish Occupational Road Safety Alliance: [www.scorsa.org.uk](http://www.scorsa.org.uk) (free information and advice including access to guidance from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, also available at [www.rospa.org.uk](http://www.rospa.org.uk))
- EU-OSHA, VeSafe vehicle safety e-guide: <https://equides.osha.europa.eu/vehicle-safety/>

## Conversation starter 2: Retail environment

Working in a retail environment, you are responsible for refilling shelves at the end of each day. This involves checking what has been sold, going into the warehouse, picking the necessary items, returning to the shop and placing the items on the shelves. You have been provided with a trolley and gloves with a suitable grip; however, the height of the top shelf means that you have to stretch, and this is causing you discomfort.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Do you agree that early symptoms of an MSD suggest that a reassessment of the task is required? What skills does the team involved in the risk assessment process need to have to undertake this successfully?
- Considering the information provided on work content and organisation, what modifications could be made to the task and/or equipment provided to reduce the risk of MSDs? For example, how helpful would the provision of a step stool be? How could the frequency of the handling activity be reduced?
- How would you raise your concerns with your employer?
- To avoid similar situations arising in future, how can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

EU-OSHA, *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses*:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>

## Conversation starter 3: Men's work, women's work and MSDs

In a fish processing factory, the men work in jobs involving tasks such as heavy lifting and driving forklift trucks. Their work involves moving about the factory and doing different kinds of tasks during the working day. The women work continuously on the production line, cleaning, filleting and packaging the fish, doing very repetitive work at a fast pace. There is little variety in their work.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- How could these differences in the ways men and women work affect their health?
- Is lifting work and repetitive work viewed in the same way in terms of the physical load and difficulty involved? If so, how could this influence the prevention of MSDs?
- What changes could be made to improve the working conditions of both women and men? How might this be good for the organisation?
- Do you recognise a similar situation in your workplace and, if so, how might it be affecting men's and women's health and safety? How would you go about raising awareness of the issues and ensuring that they are addressed?
- How might this benefit both workers and the organisation?

### Background information for the facilitator

Women and men are strongly segregated into different work sectors and different tasks even when they work in the same place. This affects their health and safety because they are exposed to different hazards and the work of men and women is viewed differently. In the fish factory, men may suffer back pain and injuries, which in the worst cases can be serious. Some of the women will develop painful conditions in their neck, shoulders, arms and hands from the production line work. The men's work is considered more physically demanding and more attention is paid to their health and safety, including training.

Therefore, it is important that equal attention is paid to the working conditions of the women on the production line. Another option would be to train men and women to do various tasks and rotate them between those tasks, for example training both men and women to drive the forklift trucks, or adapting the equipment used in lifting to enable women to do that work too, which would also have the benefit of making the work safer and easier for everyone.

In addition, the notion that men must be strong should be challenged and everyone should be encouraged to talk about any early symptoms of MSDs that they may have.

### Alternative activity using a video clip: 'The organisation makes a difference — why the work environment looks different for women and men'

Show the video clip from 1:36 to 4:57 (if possible, stop the video at 3:36). Present the topics for discussion set out above.

Follow-up: show the video clip from 4:57 to 6:30 (or from 3:36 to 6:30). Present the following topics for discussion:



## Conversation Starters for Workplace Discussions

- Do you recognise this situation in your workplace?
- What could be done to ensure that both men's and women's health, safety and well-being are given equal attention?

### Additional information and the video clip

- Swedish Work Environment Authority, 'The organisation makes a difference':  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xurUalBma8Y&feature=youtu.be&list=PLEIRHW0U5qeqN4qt2rgZ74OKVssxWBcji>

EU-OSHA, 'Factsheet 43 — Including gender issues in risk assessment':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/43/view>

## Conversation starter 4: Staff canteen

You work in a staff canteen that provides hot and cold meals for up to 300 staff over a 2-hour period, from Monday to Friday each week. Preparing the food involves peeling and chopping vegetables. This is usually done by a machine; however, the machine has broken down.

For the past 2 weeks you have been chopping vegetables manually and experiencing wrist pain. You have mentioned this to your supervisor but they are unsympathetic.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- On a personal level, MSDs are painful and in many cases life limiting; what impact can they have at an organisational level and why?
- Having raised this issue with your supervisor, how confident would you be in raising it with a more senior manager in your organisation?
- To avoid similar situations arising in future, how can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- EU-OSHA, *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses*: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>

## Conversation starter 5: Hand-arm vibration

Working as a machine operator in a production environment, you have been exposed to hand-arm vibration (HAV); you recognise the symptoms from a training session you had a number of years ago. You have raised concerns about the lack of machine maintenance, but the production manager has ignored these.

You are highly skilled and a real asset to the organisation, but you are considering leaving if your concerns are not addressed.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- There has been significant staff turnover in the organisation since your initial HAV-related training; can you explain the causes of HAV and its symptoms to your co-workers?
- How regularly should training for workers and managers be refreshed and what is the significance of the machinery being poorly maintained?
- To avoid similar situations arising in future, how can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 'Hand-arm vibration at work':  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/vibration/hav/index.htm>
- NHS Health Scotland, Healthy Working Lives, 'Vibration':  
<https://www.healthyworkinglives.scot/workplace-guidance/health-risks/vibration/Pages/common-hazards-and-controls.aspx>

### Additional information for the facilitator

- EU-OSHA, 'E-fact 19 — Prevention of vibration risks in the construction sector':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/e-facts/efact19/view>

## Conversation starter 6: Small family business

You work in a small family business that has been at the same premises for a number of years. The facility is not purpose built and over the years materials have accumulated. Much of the storage is below waist height, which creates a manual handling risk and the potential for lower back pain.

You are loyal to the family but concerned about the impact on your hands, arms and back of moving and carrying materials.

### What do you do?

Topics for discussion

- Do you recognise a similar scenario in your own workplace? Do you agree that early symptoms of an MSD suggest that a full reassessment of the workplace is required?
- Bearing in mind that this is a small business, what skills does the team involved in the risk assessment process need to have to undertake this successfully? What are the benefits of working as a team to identify MSD risk factors in your workplace?
- What is the importance of good housekeeping and storage as part of a workplace review? How would you raise your concerns with your employer?
- What is the value that workers add to an organisation?

### Additional information

- EU-OSHA, 'Factsheet 73 — Hazards and risks associated with manual handling of loads in the workplace': <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/73/view>

## Conversation starter 7: Using body mapping to collect data on early symptoms of MSDs

The '[Understanding musculoskeletal disorders' toolkit](#) places great emphasis on the importance of recognising early symptoms and taking the necessary preventive action. Collecting data helps to prioritise any actions to be taken as a result of a risk assessment, for example.

As technology advances and work content and work organisation change, what simple ways are there to record emerging health issues, and, once these issues are identified, how does your organisation modify policies and procedures to initiate early health interventions?

Introduce page 77 and Annex 2 of *Healthy workers, thriving companies*, referred to in 'Additional information' below, and give copies to participants before beginning the discussion.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- What data do your organisation currently collect to help prioritise preventive measures in relation to MSDs?
- How are these data collected?
- How are these data used to identify hazards, risks and measures, and to prioritise actions?
- As a worker, do you know how to report the early symptoms of MSDs?
- Does your organisation use body mapping as a way of collecting information?
- What advantages might body mapping have and what might it be most useful for?
- If body mapping is used, how does it help in identifying hazards, risks and measures, and in prioritising actions?

### Additional information

- EU-OSHA, *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses*: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>

### Additional information for the facilitator

- HSE, 'Body mapping tool': <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/pdfs/body-mapping-questionnaire.pdf>
- Victorian Trades Hall Council, 'Body mapping': <http://www.ohsrep.org.au/tool-kit/ohs-reps-@-work-mapping-/part-1-body-mapping>
- *Napo training resources — 'Understanding musculoskeletal disorders' toolkit*: <https://www.napofilm.net/en/learning-with-napo/napo-in-the-workplace/>

## Conversation starter 8: Early education and the school bag

You work for an organisation that has explained the importance of managing the workplace environment to minimise the onset of MSDs. You recognise that the control measures applied in the workplace also apply to your home and leisure activities.

However, you see your child struggling to carry their bag to and from school each day, often over one shoulder.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- How would you approach the topic of the importance of a healthy back at all ages with your child or another young person?
- Can you suggest any ways in which the weight of the bag could be reduced?
- How would you explain the benefits of carrying the bag correctly and why that would reduce the risk of MSDs?
- Would you encourage the young person to have a conversation with the school about healthy backs and the provision of storage?
- How could you start a conversation about this and other possible MSD hazards (e.g. postures and furniture) with your child's school or other parents?
- Do you think that this type of early education in MSD hazards would benefit employers? If so, why?

### Additional information

- Association of Paediatric Chartered Physiotherapists: 'Choosing the right school bag': <https://www.shb.scot.nhs.uk/departments/physiotherapy/APCP%20School%20Bag%20Advice.pdf>
- BackCare, 'Bags versus backpacks': <http://backcare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/BCAW-2010-Bags.pdf>

### Additional information for the facilitator

- World Health Organization, 'School and youth health': [https://www.who.int/school\\_youth\\_health/gshi/hps/en/](https://www.who.int/school_youth_health/gshi/hps/en/)
- ENETOSH (European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health) website: <http://www.enetosh.net/>

## Conversation starter 9: Neck and shoulder pains from office work — telling your employer

You work in an office. You like your job, which is varied and busy, but it involves a lot of time sitting in front of the computer screen. You have noticed that at work you have started to get aches and pains in your neck and shoulders, but you don't want to make a fuss and haven't spoken about it either to your colleagues or to your employer. You are also concerned that you will not be taken seriously, and they are only minor aches and pains anyway.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Why do you think it is important for you and for your employer that you report your concerns and symptoms? What could the consequences be if you say nothing?
- How would you raise your concerns and symptoms with your employer? What preparation and planning would you do? What issues would you cover?
- What might put you off raising your concerns and symptoms?
- What could your organisation do to make it easier for you to report symptoms as early as possible?
- How can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to tackle signs of health problems as early as possible to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- See Annex 1, 'Let's talk ... for workers'
- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employees: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827\\_document/Employee\\_Booklet\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827_document/Employee_Booklet_web_version_.pdf)
- The questions in Annex 1 can also be used with other conversation starters

## Conversation starter 10: Suspected back pain from work — speaking with the worker

(Note for facilitator: choose one of the following scenarios to use with the group, or create your own.)

You suspect or it is reported to you that one of your workers has early symptoms of a back problem. They work in a warehouse and their work involves some lifting and carrying, and driving a forklift truck.

You suspect or it is reported to you that one of your cleaning workers has early symptoms of a back problem. Their work involves some lifting and carrying, as well as repetitive physical work in awkward postures to empty bins and clean the floors.

You suspect or it is reported to you that one of your office workers has early symptoms of an MSD. The job involves a lot of time sitting in front of the computer screen and sometimes the worker has to work at a fast pace to help you meet a specific deadline.

You run a hairdressing salon. You suspect or it is reported to you that one of your workers has early symptoms of an MSD. The job involves a lot of time standing, using awkward postures, making repetitive movements to cut hair, and holding equipment such as hairdryers and clippers.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Why do you think it would be important for your workers to report their concerns and symptoms to you as soon as possible? What could be the negative consequences of not knowing about a worker's early symptoms of MSDs?
- How would you approach the individual? How could you start the conversation? What sort of things would you want to cover in the conversation?
- Would you encourage them to seek medical advice as soon as possible?
- How would you follow up after the conversation? What action should you take?
- How would you handle confidentiality, particularly if medical information is involved?
- What might put workers off raising concerns and symptoms?
- What could you and your organisation do to make it easier for workers to report symptoms to you as early as possible? What policies should the organisation have?
- How can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to tackle signs of health problems as early as possible to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- See Annex 2, 'Let's talk ... for managers'
- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employers: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC\\_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf)
- The questions in Annex 2 can also be used with other conversation starters



## Conversation starter 11: A diagnosis of arthritis — telling your employer

You have been diagnosed with arthritis. Up until now, you have been able to manage your work and have not told anyone about it, but your aches and pains have been increasing. Some activities — such as commuting during rush hour, having to sit for a long time during meetings or standing for a prolonged time when you go on site — have been beginning to cause you some difficulty. You are worried that you may need more time off work as the flare-ups become worse or if you need time to seek medical treatment.

You really like your work, but you are feeling anxious and stressed, as you know you need some support at work, but you are worried about what your colleagues will say and how your employer will act if they know about your condition. The anxiety is not helping your condition.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Why do you think it is important for you and for your employer that you report your concerns and symptoms? What could the consequences be if you say nothing?
- How would you raise your concerns and symptoms with your employer? What preparation and planning would you do? What issues would you cover?
- What might put you off raising your concerns and symptoms?
- What could your organisation do to make it easier for you to report symptoms as early as possible?
- How can workers and the organisation's leadership work together to tackle signs of health problems as early as possible to create a healthy future?

### Additional information

- See Annex 1, 'Let's talk ... for workers'
- Versus Arthritis, 'Work': <https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/living-with-arthritis/work/>
- Arthritis Care, *Working with arthritis*: <https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/1422/working-with-arthritis-booklet.pdf>
- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, *Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employees*: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827\\_document/Employee\\_Booklet\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827_document/Employee_Booklet_web_version_.pdf)
- EU-OSHA, Working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs): [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working\\_with\\_rheumatic\\_and\\_musculoskeletal\\_diseases\\_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

## Conversation starter 12: Communicating with a worker about their arthritis

One of your workers has been taking more time off work than usual and hasn't seemed their usual self when at work. Their job is varied and busy, but it involves a lot of time sitting in front of the computer screen. They are a good worker and normally just gets on with things. They come to talk to you and tell you that they have received a diagnosis of arthritis.

They think they can manage to continue working if they can adjust their workstation to be more comfortable, perhaps change their commuting times so that they can avoid travelling on public transport during rush hours and work more flexibly to accommodate medical appointments, for example.

### What do you do?

#### Topics for discussion

- Why do you think it is important for your workers to feel confident that they can discuss health problems with you at the earliest opportunity? What could the consequences be if they delay the conversation?
- How would you approach a conversation with a worker about a non-work-related MSD problem? What issues would you cover?
- What might put your workers off raising their concerns and symptoms?
- What could your organisation do to make it easier for workers to disclose health problems as early as possible?
- How would you explore the situation with the worker and identify with them the support they might need, such as workplace adaptations?
- What sort of policies should the organisation have in place and how should these be communicated to workers?

### Additional information

- See Annex 2, 'Let's talk ... for managers'
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS), *When an employee has rheumatoid arthritis*: <https://www.nras.org.uk/data/files/Publications/When%20an%20Employee%20has%20Rheumatoid%20Arthritis%20-.pdf>
- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, *Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employers*: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC\\_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf)
- EU-OSHA, Working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs): [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working\\_with\\_rheumatic\\_and\\_musculoskeletal\\_diseases\\_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

## Annex 1: Let's talk ... for workers — raising your diagnosis of arthritis (or another musculoskeletal disease) with your employer

You're not legally required to disclose a medical problem such as arthritis to your employer, but your employer has a duty to protect your health and safety at work, make sure that they don't discriminate against you because of your condition and provide any individual modifications that you may need. They cannot do this if they are unaware of your condition. If you are anxious about telling your employer, is there a co-worker you could tell? Is there a trade union where you work that could support you? Work involving lifting, carrying, constant standing or even prolonged sitting can be tough on the body when you have a condition such as arthritis, so you may need certain modifications to make your work manageable. Telling your employer about your arthritis, joint pain or related condition at an early stage could really help your working life. If you do chat with them about your medical condition, they are obliged to keep what you tell them private and not disclose it to anyone else without your consent.

If you want to talk, here are a few tips for making the conversation easier.

### Communication tips for workers

**Before you chat:** talk with your doctor or another health professional about working with arthritis. Think about the work schedule you may need and the accommodations you should ask for. Can you get suggestions and advice from others who are working with arthritis or from the website of an arthritis organisation? A letter from your doctor, or another health professional who is treating you, may help to explain your condition and the impact it may have on you. The letter could also include information about the support you may need. You could also take along any relevant information you have found, for example from an arthritis organisation, to help you explain your situation and needs.

**Decide what you will say and request:** plan beforehand what you want to say and cover, such as:

- the condition that you have
- the symptoms you experience
- how your condition can make you feel on a bad day
- the effects of any medication you are taking
- what tasks you may need some help with
- how your symptoms can vary on a daily basis
- why you feel that with some support you'll be able to do your job very well
- the adjustments or support that could be put in place to help you (think about you, your manager and your organisation).

Things to consider include the need for time off during the day to visit your doctor and to deal with flare-ups (which are generally unexpected); if you want to start your working day later or work from home in the morning if you have more aches at the start of the day; equipment or changes to the tasks or work you do. If you are not sure, you can always have an initial conversation with your employer and tell them that you will speak again once you know more about your condition. If you wish your colleagues to be informed, you may want to discuss and agree on the best way to go about this.

**Beginning the conversation:** create an opportunity for a conversation. Even if you are not someone who readily communicates with your manager, once the initial conversation has taken place it will become easier for you. In any case, schedule an appointment to ensure that you get their time and attention. Speak with them in a comfortable area and in private. Take a pen and paper with you to make notes during the conversation. You may want to get decisions on important issues in writing afterwards.

Start by informing your employer about your diagnosis, your symptoms and how your condition affects you (see the points suggested in the section 'Decide what you will say and request' above). This is important because your manager may have no knowledge or understanding of your condition, or may have misconceptions about it, so gaining an insight into how it affects you will help them to support you in the right way.

Next, you will want to carry on the conversation with your employer regarding the support you need. The following suggestions may help you. You will need to adapt them depending on your symptoms and the work you do:

- I think I can manage my work with some adjustments or support. The parts of my work I have some problems with are ...
- Most of the time I am OK, but when it flares up I think X would help me.
- I have some suggestions for adjustments or support that I think could help me that I would like to discuss with you.
- I have some suggestions about how the work could be done differently/how my job could be modified.
- Could you arrange a workplace assessment to identify problems and solutions?
- Could we try out Y and Z on a trial basis?
- Could we agree on a plan for the future, including regular review meetings?
- Either 'For the time being I don't want to inform my colleagues. I will let you know when I am ready to do this' or 'Could you support me in telling my colleagues?'

## Activity

This annex could also be used to develop a short role-play exercise linked to any of the conversation starters.

## Additional information

- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, *Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employers*: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC\\_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/17/7F9176BC-5189-43BB-8A6862BA0F3DA4FC_document/WorkingwithArthritisEmployerGuideV6lr.pdf)
- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, *Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employees*: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827\\_document/Employee\\_Booklet\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827_document/Employee_Booklet_web_version_.pdf)
- Versus Arthritis, 'Work': <https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/living-with-arthritis/work/>
- Arthritis Care, *Working with arthritis*: <https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/1422/working-with-arthritis-booklet.pdf>
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- EU-OSHA, *Return to work strategies to prevent disability from musculoskeletal disorders*: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Return\\_to\\_work\\_strategies\\_to\\_prevent\\_disability\\_from\\_musculoskeletal\\_disorders](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Return_to_work_strategies_to_prevent_disability_from_musculoskeletal_disorders)
- EU-OSHA, *Working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs)*: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working\\_with\\_rheumatic\\_and\\_musculoskeletal\\_diseases\\_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

## Annex 2: Let's talk ... for managers — how we can help with your arthritis (or other musculoskeletal disease)?

With the right support and adjustments, people with rheumatoid arthritis can usually continue in employment. The earlier a worker comes forward to discuss their arthritis with you the better, for their own well-being and reassurance and because modifications made early on may also be cheaper than those that would be needed at a later stage. No doubt you will want to offer support simply to do the right thing for your worker, but you should also be aware that it's against the law to discriminate against a disabled person.

For most people, this will not be an easy conversation. They are having to cope with receiving a life-changing diagnosis, and they are likely to feel uncertain about the outlook for their future, including their work. They may also feel guilty if their condition has started to affect their performance at work.

Often, problems they may be having with their work can be resolved easily and simply. You may need to arrange a workplace assessment to identify problems and potential solutions. A crucial part of this is communicating effectively with the worker about the situation, showing understanding and taking a supportive approach.

For this to happen, workers need to feel confident that they can speak to their employer, feeling that what they say will be treated in confidence and will not be viewed negatively by their employer. Employers need to be open and encourage that conversation, but knowing how to have the conversation can be an obstacle.

Below are some tips for managers to help communication take place.

### Communication tips for managers

A supportive approach includes:

- Making sure that workers understand how any policies in the organisation apply to them.
- Discussing with them whether and how they want to inform colleagues:
  - Do you wish to inform colleagues, or do you wish to keep this confidential?
  - What would be the best way to go about informing them? Do you need my support to inform them?
- Agreeing on a series of review meetings with the worker to discuss their needs, including any adjustments they may need:
  - We should meet again to discuss the support you need from us. When would suit you?
- Exploring the situation with them:
  - What aspects of your role can you complete without a problem?
  - What aspects do you think you may struggle with?
  - As an experienced and valued worker, what adjustments or support do you think could help you? What could be done differently? How could we adjust your work to help you? Are there any changes to the equipment that you use that could help? How can the organisation and I support you?
  - What do you think of X? Would Y work for you?
- Examining the work environment and accessibility. Consider working hours, additional training and adjustments to the worker's role. Trials should be made of adjustments, and changes to the job may be temporary or permanent.
- Agreeing on a plan for the future, and a communication and review process.
- Creating an 'open door' approach to managing health problems.

## Activity

This annex could also be used to develop a short role-play exercise linked to any of the conversation starters.

## Additional information

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- Arthritis Ireland/Fit for Work Ireland, *Working with arthritis, back pain & related conditions: A guide for employees*: [https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827\\_document/Employee\\_Booklet\\_\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.arthritisireland.ie/assets/50/2D5C05E7-BA86-4582-9DD162F365DCB827_document/Employee_Booklet__web_version_.pdf)
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- EU-OSHA, *Workers with disabilities*: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Workers\\_with\\_disabilities](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Workers_with_disabilities)
- EU-OSHA, *Return to work strategies to prevent disability from musculoskeletal disorders*: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Return\\_to\\_work\\_strategies\\_to\\_prevent\\_disability\\_from\\_musculoskeletal\\_disorders](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Return_to_work_strategies_to_prevent_disability_from_musculoskeletal_disorders)
- EU-OSHA, *Working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs)*: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working\\_with\\_rheumatic\\_and\\_musculoskeletal\\_diseases\\_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

**The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)** contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

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