



Time2Work

Module 2:

Support materials for people who are already employed when they develop a rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease

Adapting the workplace

Health and safety at work are focused on enabling a sustainable work life by minimising the risk of health hazards. Other health risks involve the musculoskeletal system and here occupational therapists and ergonomists* will evaluate the relationship between jobs and environments and how these can be made compatible with the needs, abilities and limitations of workers.¹ This might mean providing adapted equipment or make adaptations in work tasks or in the psychosocial environment. Well-designed equipment or adaptations are not just good for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs), they are often good for everyone.

Healthy workplaces are good for you and good for the business.

Assessments and adaptations can be made for people with RMDs and other chronic diseases, but first you will need to tell your employer or manager about your health condition. Your needs may change over time and/or as your disease progresses. You will need to make your employer or manager aware of your changing needs so that a work place, or risk assessment can be made for you. Your employer may have a prevention scheme in place and may arrange an annual assessment. Adaptations should be tailored to your needs and may include changes to your work environment, as well as changes to your working practices, such as working less, or flexible hours or changing job tasks.

In some European countries, employers have a legal obligation to adapt your workplace to enable you to work. This means fitting the work to the worker and fitting the worker to the work. [NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS TO PROVIDE ANY APPLICABLE NATIONAL LAWS]

See also fact sheet, 'To disclose or not to disclose'

As an employee you also have obligations to make correct use of machinery and equipment and to inform your employer of any situations that may affect your, or others', health and safety at work.

If your job involves sitting for long periods of time, studies have shown the value of appropriate exercise for people with RMDs. for example, taking regular stretching breaks could help stop your joints stiffening up.²

In order to determine what adaptations are right for you, a risk assessment should be conducted by an occupational therapist or ergonomist. Various risk assessment methods exist, and different ones are available in different countries. A risk assessment should identify what adaptations you need to continue working.

Premises and equipment

At the European level, health and safety legislation requires employers to make certain adaptations for their staff. Some that are of relevance for people with RMDs include:

- Organising workplaces to take account of workers with disabilities, if necessary. This includes doors, passageways, staircases, showers, washbasins, lavatories and workstations used or occupied directly by persons with disabilities
- Making work equipment that is suitable available
- Ergonomic improvements in the work place

For further information see the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website: www.osha.gov/

Financing workplace adaptations depends on national legislation. In reality, whilst legislation exists and can be applied to larger employers, many smaller employers may not have the capacity, capabilities or funds to make all, or any, of the necessary adaptations and accommodations to meet your changing needs.

Patterns of working time

A flexible working schedule can be a very important adaptation for people with RMDs. Such a schedule might allow for early morning stiffness, fatigue and hospital and treatment appointments. Also, because RMDs can flare, or symptoms can be

more evident in different moments of the day (e.g. morning stiffness), flexible working can allow for an irregular schedule.

The distribution of tasks

The tasks that you carry out in your work may be able to be adapted to your ability. This might include job sharing with other members of staff to distribute the tasks in a way that matches all of your strengths. This might also include changes to the remit of your job such that you can comfortably carry out all your responsibilities.

Provision of training or integration resources

If you need to change jobs or the way you work, employers may provide training and integration resources to help you transition into a different job or way of working. Find out what your employer or employment services can offer.

****Ergonomics** is the scientific discipline concerned with understanding the of interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data and methods to design in order to optimise human well-being and overall system. (IEA, 2000)*