



Time2Work

Module 3:

Support materials for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases returning to work after rehabilitation

For most people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases it is important to undertake paid work despite of their condition.^{1,2,3,4} It can be hard to find a balance between paid work and everyday life in general.^{4,5,6} Thus, you need to be aware of options for support.

How your doctor and healthcare team can help

Your doctor and healthcare team have an important role to play in helping you return to work, if you choose.

If returning to employment is important to you, you need to make this clear to your doctor or specialist and discuss it with them as early as possible. Your doctor will provide you with a sick note when you have a flare or need to take time work for rehabilitation, but some doctors may keep signing you off because they do not realise that your work and ability to work is important to you.

If your condition has deteriorated, discuss the type of work you were doing and whether it is feasible for you to return to this, or whether you might need to consider an alternative form of employment. Your doctor or occupational therapist may be able to refer you to other members of the healthcare team, such as a physiotherapist or an occupational therapist as part of your rehabilitation.⁶ An occupational therapist will be able to assess you/your health condition and provide you with practical help and suggestions for the type of work related adaptations you might need depending on the kind of work you are planning to do in the future. An occupational therapist

could also provide you with possible changes of work-related behaviour and changes of the work environment and/or work place

Keeping your RMD well managed is important for your independence and ability to work. Talk to your doctor and about the most appropriate and effective pharmacological treatment and talk to your healthcare team about what else you can do to help yourself. Find out about national organisations or local groups for people with RMDs that may be able to help and support you.

- Look for options for support from external services like career advisors and other health professionals [NATIONAL ORGANISATION PROVIDE LIST OF NATIONAL SOCIETIES]

Doctor and hospital appointments

It is helpful to employers to be able to plan for absences in advance. Ask your doctor if he or she can give you an idea of the amount of time you might need to take off for routine check-up appointments, treatments and rehabilitation so you can inform a potential employer, if asked. Whilst this will be very helpful, you will need to take into consideration that RMDs are not always predictable and you could have a flare at any time.

It is important that you give yourself time to fully recover after rehabilitation, so don't go back to work too soon. On the other hand, you may feel that you can manage to do some work from home or return to work gradually by working for a limited number of hours or days a week to start. Use your own experience of your condition and advice from your doctor/members of your healthcare team to help you assess how much you can take on and discuss with your employer how soon you can return to your normal level of activity.

Dealing with pain, fatigue and morning stiffness

Despite the constant development of new pharmacological and surgical treatments, many people with inflammatory arthritis (rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis or spondyloarthritis) still experience problems with pain, fatigue, reduced mobility and psychological distress in their everyday lives.^{1,2,3} Between 35 and 40% of patients with rheumatoid arthritis experience stress, anxiety or depression.⁷

Pain is the most common symptom of RMDs and managing pain can be one of the hardest things to achieve. Make sure that the activities you perform in your job are not exacerbating your condition and causing pain. You may be able to alleviate any stress to your body by adapting your workplace or the way you work. Your doctor may be able to refer you to an occupational therapist who can help you with work adaptations.⁶ Some larger employers may have occupational health departments that can help you with work assessments and adaptations. In some countries, it is possible to get an occupational therapist from the community service to visit your work place to assess relevant changes. As for options in your region/local community.

If you are looking for a sedentary job, make sure you take regular stretching breaks. A physiotherapist or occupational therapist may be able to recommend exercises

you can do at your desk or workstation to help prevent stressing your joints by repetitive movements and keeping your joints mobile. Physical activity and exercise after work is important for you to be able to continue to fulfil the physical demands at work.

If you are performing manual work, there may be adaptations that can be made to relieve the stresses on your joints. Your doctor, physiotherapist or occupational therapist may be able to advise you on adaptations you could make to the way you perform tasks and/or of equipment or assistive devices that could help you. Also, for some RMDs working outdoors may affect conditions such as photosensitivity and Reynaud's syndrome and this may need to be discussed. Depending on the type and aggressiveness of your RMD, you may need to consider an alternative occupation to the one you did previously.

If you find it hard to manage your pain, discuss treatment options with your doctor or specialist. Keeping a pain diary or using a pain monitoring app to map when you are having most pain and any exacerbating factors may be useful to bring at your next consultation with your doctor or nurse. Ask them about options of pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatment. These can be alternative types and combinations of painkillers, the use of heat and cold packs, and psychological support to help manage your pain.

Fatigue is another common problem that may affect all areas of life.⁸ Fatigue is associated to i.e. pain, physical inactivity, depression, obesity, and poor sleep. Fatigue may affect concentration, problem solving, memory and your motivation to socialize and thus may impact your work ability.⁸ Starting something new is always tiring, as there is so much to think about and take in. Expect to feel more tired when you start a new job.

If you find your work takes all your energy and that you are exhausted when you get home, assess if there is anything you can do to make your work or commuting to work less tiring. You may also consider whether there are tasks at work and after work you can avoid or ask for help to fulfil.

Physical activity can lower your fatigue level.^{9,10} It can be exercise at moderate intensity, but even a reduction of sedentary time can reduce the severity of your fatigue.¹¹ Also, cognitive behavioural therapy can help ease your fatigue.^{9,12}

It is important to try to maintain a good balance between your work and home and social activities. You can try to keep a diary of your fatigue level and your activities for a couple of weeks and reflect upon whether there are patterns to learn from by looking at the days you felt less fatigued and days where you felt totally exhausted.¹²

Your sleep at night can also affect your fatigue level as well as mood and pain and many persons with inflammatory arthritis experience problems with sleep.¹³ Light to moderate physical activity can contribute to a better sleep quality, but avoid physical activity close to bedtime.¹⁰ If you do not sleep well, or you are feeling more fatigued than usual, your doctor or nurse may be able to help.

Morning stiffness affects many people with RMDs. If you have severe morning stiffness you might consider asking an employer if it is possible to start work a little later and work a little longer to make up the time. Some employers offer job sharing and shift work, see if this is an option.

Heat or a hot shower may relieve morning stiffness. Ask your doctor, physiotherapist or occupational therapist if they can recommend any exercises or other strategies to help relieve morning stiffness.

Overcoming anxiety, stress and low moods

Taking time off work for rehabilitation can also affect you emotionally and lead to a loss of confidence. If you are feeling out of control, lacking in confidence or feel unsupported, this may affect your mood. It is easy to say, 'keep positive', but sometimes it is easier said than done. You may find you are able to deal with low moods yourself and with support from your family and friends, but if you are experiencing severe and/or persistent anxiety, stress or low moods, do go see your doctor.

There are a number of techniques that you may use to help you build confidence and improve your mood, such as relaxation and cognitive behavioural therapy. You can reflect on what triggers anxiety and low confidence and what you feel helps. Ask your doctor if he or she can suggest any techniques or programmes to help you relax or refer you to the appropriate specialist or therapy.

In many countries self-management courses are available to people with RMDs. Your healthcare team may be able to recommend one, or to give you the contact details for a support group that runs such courses.

Improving your consultation

Most doctors will have limited appointment times, so it is important that you make the most of your consultation:

- Tell your doctor or specialist about your goals and any plans to return to work
- Keep a note of your physical and emotional symptoms and any exacerbating factors
- Keep a note of medications and treatments – include prescribed medicines and therapies, medicines you buy from the pharmacy and complimentary treatments and therapies
- Make a list of questions you want to ask your doctor about your condition, medications, treatments, therapies and options for support
- Inform your doctor about how your condition affects your everyday activities and the ability to live independently, including any work-related issues

Supporting references

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