



Time2Work

Module 3:

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

To disclose or not to disclose

Whether or not you disclose your condition to a potential employer or, once you are employed to a manager or your co-workers, is ultimately up to you to decide. This document looks at some considerations you may want to think about beforehand and perhaps discuss with family, friends or someone you respect and trust.

Some employers are committed to employing people with disabilities – look out for positive statements on disability or equal opportunities. Employers that have equal opportunities policies demonstrate they employ without prejudice.

Depending on the severity of your condition and disability, there may be physical manifestations of your rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease (RMD) that make it impossible to hide. In this case you may have to inform an employer about your condition and what this means in terms of what you can do. This gives you an opportunity to discuss how you could manage and/or adapt your work for your condition, for example by flexible working or with possible workplace adaptations (*see also section, 'Do I need to disclose?' below and the separate fact sheet, 'Adapting the Workplace'*).

If your condition is not obvious and your symptoms are not severe and/or are well controlled, you will face the dilemma of many other people with RMDs, whether or not to tell a potential employer about your condition (*see also fact sheet on 'Preparing for an interview with a potential employer'*). In an ideal world you should feel comfortable about saying you have a RMD that may require you to occasionally

take some time off work for a hospital appointment or treatment, or to work flexibly when you have a flare and/or that you may need to have some workplace adaptations. The reality can be very different. Many people with RMDs do not want to disclose their condition if they don't have to, because they want to feel like everyone else and don't want to be discriminated against because of their condition.

Some people with RMDs find that keeping their condition hidden once they are in work means they put so much effort into keeping up appearances they end up having no energy left for their home and social life. Whilst work is important on a number of levels, not least financially, it is also important to consider your quality of life in general. Through considered disclosure at the right moment, it may be possible to negotiate a way of managing a work / life balance in a way that is agreeable to both you and your employer.

Disclosing your condition may also be helpful later if you need to request 'reasonable adjustments'. If you have not declared your RMD an employer could be justified in failing to make adjustments for you.

Reasonable adjustments include aspects of your working arrangements, such as the building, work environment or your working hours, that might put you at a substantial disadvantage compared to a non-disabled person doing the same job. There is no certainty about what is or is not reasonable, but the cost and difficulty in making the adjustments and the size of the employer will be taken into account. Reasonable, but generally inexpensive adjustments might include:

- Allowing time for medical appointments or treatment
- Flexible working hours / starting work later
- Providing car parking space close to work
- Adjustments to your work station etc.

(Reasonable adjustments are within your rights under the UK Disability Discrimination Act) [NATIONAL ORGANISATION TO ADJUST TO RELEVANT NATIONAL DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT. NB THESE CAN CHANGE, SO SHOULD BE CHECKED REGULARLY]

See also fact sheet, *Adapting your workplace*

Do you need to disclose your RMD?

You do not have a legal requirement to *volunteer* information about your condition, unless:

- It is required in your contract of employment
- Your RMD might affect your or your co-workers health and safety, in which case you are obliged to inform your employer (UK 1974 Health and Safety Act).

[NATIONAL ORGANISATION TO INSERT RELEVANT NATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY ACTS]

You may be asked a direct question on an **application form or medical questionnaire**. If you give false information about this, and an employer finds out the truth later, you could risk losing your job.

You will be in a much better position of trust if you provide details of your condition to your employer or manager. Also, if you don't let people know you have a problem, they can't help you.

Other advantages to telling your employer or manager about your RMD include:

- It can be a strain on you hiding your symptoms and it may be a relief to disclose your condition
- If your employer or manager knows about RMD they should make reasonable adjustments for you if you satisfy the definition of a disabled person under the UK Disabled Discrimination Act) [NATIONAL ORGANISATION TO ADJUST TO RELEVANT NATIONAL DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT]

Anyone with an ongoing illness may qualify for protection against discrimination. There are various descriptions of disability. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states, Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#). The World Health Organisation (WHO) published the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) (WHO, 2001), which defined disability as a complex interaction between a person (with a health condition) and that person's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors), thus proposing a biopsychosocial approach to disability, viewing this as a multi-faceted process (Engel, 1980 ; Mosey, 1980). Therefore, it simply suggests that disability is a multifaceted concept and mainly driven by the social and environmental factors.

[NATIONAL ORGANISATION TO INSERT NATIONAL DEFINITION OF DISABILITY AS COVERED BY ANY DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION LAWS]. For example, the UK Disability Discrimination Act defines disability as, *a physical or mental impairment which has an effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*

Choosing to disclose your condition

People with RMDs usually feel more comfortable about disclosing their condition if they feel a potential employer would be supportive. If you have a supportive employer you will also experience less workplace stress.

Employers will be more willing to consider an application from someone who has a positive attitude, who shows an understanding of business needs and offers 'can do' solutions – and this applies to everyone, not just people with RMDs!

This is why good communication is vital. If you are going to disclose your condition, you need to be able to explain your health problems in a way that is as unemotional and factual as possible and offers some positive solutions to your situation. Focus on what you **can** do including your skill sets and attributes such as your knowledge,

experience, loyalty. You can also include the personal attributes you have gained by dealing with your condition such as resilience, enhanced emotional intelligence, empathy with others and the ability to work alone as well as with others.

General rules for talking about your health to employers

When you talk about your RMD, here are a few simple points to consider.

- **Don't go into too much detail about your disease and use medical language, tell people only what they *need to know*** – most people do not want to be given medical details, only discuss the aspects of your condition that may affect your work and how you can work with them to find solutions
- **Try to be positive (even when you don't always feel that way) about your disease and offer solutions** – you may have gained experiences and skills from having to cope with your condition that could be applied in a work situation

Simple things you could say about your disease to explain it and how it might affect your work include:

- there are many different types of RMD that involve inflammation of the joints, but some are systemic diseases, meaning they can affect other organs
- Most people with a RMD will experience pain and may have difficulty moving around
- RMDs may also cause loss of strength and grip, stiffness and fatigue, which can make some daily tasks difficult
- Pain may be felt in parts of the body other than the affected joint/s
- For the majority of people with RMDs, there will be some good days and some bad days

How to avert unwanted questions about your RMDs

If you do not wish to discuss details of your disease with a potential employer, beyond what might affect your work or the type of adaptations you might need, you may want to consider diverting them by:

- Politely saying that you do not wish to discuss your condition. If you wish to explain this a little further you could also add that you do not think it is relevant to your job / do not wish it to impinge upon your work or how people at work treat you / do not wish to make it a big deal or focus in your life
- Offering to direct them to a relevant patient organisation or health service website which covers information on RMDs and explain that this would be an appropriate source of further information about your condition

Always be polite and remember that it is not something you have to discuss with a potential employer unless it would affect your work or the health and safety of others and, if you do discuss it, **be positive and try to offer solutions!**

Supporting references

Hammond A, O'Brien R, Woodbridge S, Bradshaw L, Prior Y, Radford K, Culley J, Whitham D, Pilikottil- Jacob, R. (2017) Job retention vocational rehabilitation for employed people with inflammatory arthritis (WORK-IA): a feasibility randomized controlled trial. BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12891-017-1671-5>. Available on:

<https://bmcmusculoskeletaldisord.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12891-017-1671-5>

Prior Y, Sutton C, Cotterill S, Adams J, Comacho E, Arafin N, Firth J, O'Neill T, Hough Y, Jones W, Hammond A (2017) The effects of arthritis gloves on people with Rheumatoid Arthritis or Inflammatory Arthritis with hand pain: a study protocol for a multi-centre randomised controlled trial. BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders. 18-224 DOI 10.1186/s12891-017-1583-4. Available on:

<https://bmcmusculoskeletaldisord.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12891-017-1583-4>

Prior Y, Amanna A, Bodell S, Hammond A (2016) A qualitative evaluation of occupational therapy-led work rehabilitation for people with inflammatory arthritis: Patients' views. British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 1-10. DOI: 10.1177/0308022616672666