Tips for Helping Workers With Arthritis



Arthritis, which typically occurs between the ages of 35 and 50, is a leading cause of disability. That means most of the people who develop the disease between those ages are still working.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) says an estimated seven million Canadian adults will be diagnosed with arthritis within the next 20 years. In the United States, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is projecting that by the year 2040, an estimated 78 million Americans ages 18 and older will have been diagnosed with arthritis.

“Arthritis can affect workers anywhere—in offices, manufacturing plants, retail environments and those working outdoors. Common symptoms such as pain, fatigue, joint swelling, stiffness and limited movement can make it difficult to perform any job,” notes the CCOHS.

People with arthritis may experience a variety of symptoms, and periods when no symptoms are present. It is common for arthritis sufferers to feel frustrated and anxious.

“According to a national study of arthritis in the workplace, many Canadians are giving up breaks to complete tasks and using sick days and taking vacation time to rest at home in order to continue working,” notes the CCOHS.

It adds that modifying the way one performs his or her work and making changes to one’s work environment can help reduce the adverse effects of arthritis.

Share with your workers these tips from the CCOHS for reducing some of the debilitating effects of arthritis:

- Organize your workspace so that frequently used items are within easy reach.
- Stand square to your workstation so you are not bending or twisting, and use a footrest to decrease the pressure on your lower back if you work in a standing position or at a counter.
    - Use an anti-fatigue mat to help relieve strain on the lower back and legs if you stand for long periods of time on hard floors.
    - If you use a chair, use a chair mat to make it easier to slide or turn your chair. In some cases it might be beneficial to use a sit/stand stool.

    - Use of a telephone headset will reduce the amount of neck side-bending required to hold the phone receiver.
    - Sit in a proper upright, relaxed position. You should feel no strain on your back, neck or limbs. Sit so that your hips, knees, ankles and elbows are each at a 90-degree angle. Your armrests should be at the right height, with your shoulders and elbows in a relaxed position.
    - Make sure your chair is comfortable, that it provides good support to your back and legs, and that it is properly adjusted.
    - If you use a computer, use a split keyboard so that your hands, wrists and forearms are in a more natural position. The use of a specially designed mouse called a trackball mouse can reduce the amount of hand and arm movement required to perform computer tasks.
    - Make sure that your chair is positioned within a comfortable distance from the computer and that your elbows are in a relaxed 90-degree angle to the keyboard. Your eyes should be about 40 to 70 centimeters (15 to 27 inches) from the monitor. You should be looking straight ahead at the screen, at eye level.
    - If you must move heavy objects as part of your job, use a dolly or cart to help reduce strain in your back, arms and legs. Try to roll or slide heavy objects if possible. Push, don’t pull. Take your time moving objects. Rushing could cause injury to your joints. If you need help, ask a co-worker for assistance.
    - Use a step-stool to reach items high on shelves and use a briefcase on wheels when taking work home or to a meeting.
    - Wear comfortable footwear that supports your feet and promotes good posture. Avoid wearing shoes with high heels. Use insoles to help reduce strain on your feet, legs and lower back.
- You can help mitigate the effects of arthritis by getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly.
- Work at a moderate pace and plan to get extra rest if you know you have an important event coming up at work.
- Save those important or more difficult tasks for when you feel the most energetic. Switch it up to prevent straining yourself. Alternate your position from sitting, standing and walking as much as possible and take stretch breaks. Most of all, keep moving.

The CCOHS advises employers to provide an ergonomic workplace and job accommodation by allowing a flexible work schedule for workers with arthritis.

“For example, allow the employee to work from home during (arthritis) flares, and accommodate medical appointments.

Raise awareness so everyone knows what support systems are available, including the employee benefits plan, and encourage and maintain good two-way communication with employees who live with arthritis,” it says.