

Arthritis, back pain & related conditions:

“A guide for employers”



“About this guide”

Arthritis, back pain and other musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most commonly reported cause of absence from work in Ireland. This guide provides a practical source of information and guidance for employers to help you to:

- understand what MSDs are
- understand how MSDs may affect your employees
- support employees working with MSDs



About Fit for Work Ireland

Fit for Work Ireland is a unique coalition of patients, physicians, health professionals, employers, employees and policy makers working to improve the early detection, prevention and management of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in the workplace.

The Fit for Work Ireland Coalition:

- AbbVie
- Ankylosing Spondylitis Society of Ireland
- Arthritis Ireland
- Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland
- Health & Safety Authority
- HSE National Primary Care Clinical Programme
- HSE National Rheumatology Clinical Programme
- Ibec
- Irish College of General Practitioners
- Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Irish Life Corporate
- Irish Rheumatology Nursing Forum
- Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists
- Irish Society for Rheumatology
- Vhi Corporate Solutions

“Contents”

About arthritis and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)	4
How do MSDs affect employment?	6
Ensuring your employees remain healthy and in the workplace	9
Legal obligations	11
Supporting an employee who has an MSD	13
Supporting your employees: prevention & early intervention	15
Communicating about the situation	28
Support and resources	31
Useful contacts	34

“About arthritis & musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)”

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) is an umbrella term covering over 200 conditions that affect the muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments, peripheral nerves and supporting blood vessels, causing pain and functional impairment.

Musculoskeletal disorders are among the most prevalent conditions in the world. Many of these conditions share similar symptoms, such as joint or muscle pain and inflammation, but they all have their own unique symptoms also.



Common musculoskeletal conditions

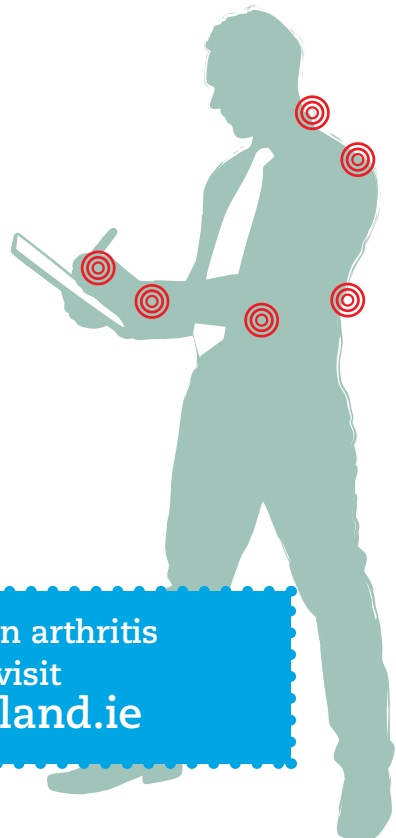
Back pain is caused by numerous factors, including muscle strain or the displacement of an intervertebral disc. These may also result from an underlying illness or injury.

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint condition affecting the weight-bearing joints, such as the hips, knees and ankles, as well as the hands and spine. In the initial stages, pain occurs in the joints during and after activity but, as the condition progresses pain may be experienced from minimal movement or even during rest.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an auto-immune disease that causes chronic inflammation of the joints. It typically affects the small joints of the hands and feet and affects the lining of the joints, causing a painful swelling that can eventually result in bone erosion and joint deformity. It occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks the body's own tissues. In addition to causing joint problems, rheumatoid arthritis sometimes can affect other organs of the body — such as the skin, eyes, lungs and blood vessels.

Work-related neck and upper limb disorders (WRULDs) are MSDs affecting the upper part of the body, caused or aggravated by certain types of work and the working environment. Examples include epicondylitis (tennis or golfer's elbow), carpal tunnel syndrome; repetitive strain injury (RSI) and neck pain.

Osteoporosis is a condition whereby there is a progressive loss of bone density and decrease in the strength of the skeleton leading to a risk of fracture.



For more information on arthritis
and other MSDs visit
www.arthritisireland.ie

“How do MSDs affect employment?”

It is natural for employers to be concerned about the possible impact of any health condition on their employees' performance and reliability, and consequently on their business.

In addition to concerns about the welfare of employees, there may well be other issues. For example the additional management requirements, such as arranging cover for sick leave, or possible additional costs, like for new equipment.



Employees with MSDs may experience a range of symptoms in the workplace which are not obvious and are difficult to understand and explain. Many of the symptoms can be invisible – like pain and fatigue. Like those with other health conditions, people with MSDs aim to manage their symptoms in a way that minimises its impact at work. Many will need only minimal assistance from their employer or colleagues to carry on meeting the demands of their role, but some employees may need to make changes in the way they do their job (if this can be accommodated) or in the type of work they do.

The effects of MSDs are different for everyone; some people are more severely affected than others. Some people may find it difficult to cope with work at some times more than at others, because of the variable pattern of their symptoms. There really is no ‘typical’ scenario because of their changing nature.

The most common symptoms experienced by people working with MSDs are:

- problems with mobility or function such as dexterity, flexibility, strength and grip
- early morning stiffness
- pain
- fatigue
- poor concentration
- reduced physical and mental stamina
- decreased agility

An MSD can affect a person's dignity and self-esteem by turning basic, everyday tasks, such as picking up a child, getting dressed or walking to the shop, into a painful and arduous struggle.

However, today people can manage their symptoms more effectively than in the past. This is due to a combination of drug treatments and other, non-medical management strategies. These range from self-management techniques, such as joint protection and energy conservation to psychological interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), for learning coping strategies for chronic pain and improving sleep.

MSDs are the most commonly reported cause of absence from work in Ireland. The direct cost of MSDs at work in Ireland is estimated to be at least €750 million.

MSDs have a significant impact on people's ability to work. Together, they affect the productivity and labour market participation of thousands of workers in Ireland.

**€750
million.**

**The direct cost of
MSD work-related
ill health in Ireland.**

Evidence suggests that:

50%

Over half of workers in Ireland report experiencing back pain each year, and over a quarter of non-fatal injuries in Irish workplaces are attributable to back pain.

80%

Up to 80% of the adult population will experience significant back pain at some time in their life. In the vast majority of people with back pain, no specific diagnosis is given.

60%

Just under 60% of workers in Ireland experience muscular pain in their neck, shoulders and upper limbs. Work-related upper-limb disorders (WRULDs) can affect the tendons, muscles, joints, blood vessels and/or the nerves and may include pain, discomfort, numbness, and tingling sensations in the affected area.

With the appropriate supports and self-management, the above statistics could be reduced.



“Ensuring your employees remain healthy and in the workplace”

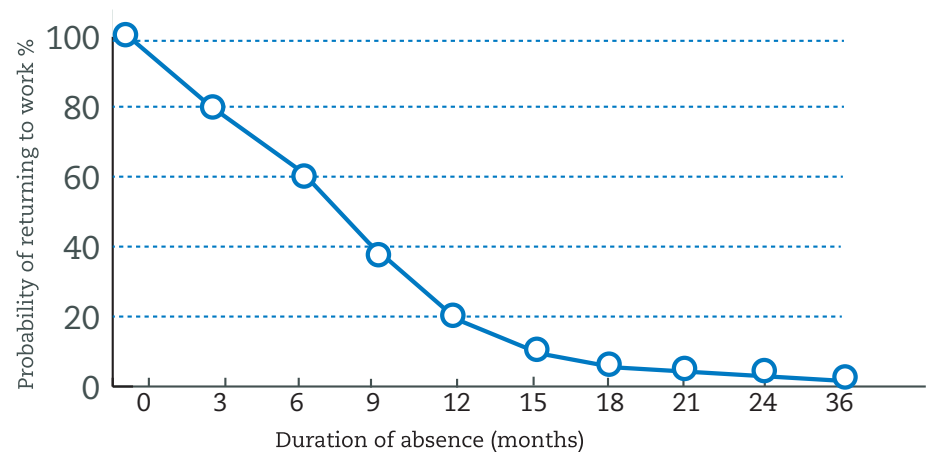
Being diagnosed with an MSD does not alter the person's knowledge or skills. As an employer, you may well have invested considerable time and resources in developing the individual. It makes good business sense to continue reaping the benefits of that investment.



Ask employers what their most valuable asset is and they invariably reply - my employees. They place a high priority on retaining the skills and experience of valued members of staff, particularly given the high costs of recruitment, induction and training for new staff.

However, there can be straightforward and inexpensive strategies to minimise the effects of MSDs on employment, from which both employers and employees benefit. If people are absent from work for long periods of time, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to return. Early intervention is key to enabling a timely return to work which will be more cost effective for the employer in the long-term as long as the employee remains fit to do their role subject to reasonable accommodation on the part of their employer. The longer the absence, the lower the probability of long-term successful return to work (see graph below).

Probability of returning to work



“Legal obligations”

As an employer, it is important to understand your legal obligations. The following is a brief summary of the legislation that you need to be aware of.



Equality legislation:

The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 outlaw discrimination on the grounds of disability in employment, including training and recruitment. However, the Employment Equality Acts state that an employer is not obliged to recruit or retain a person who is not fully competent or capable of undertaking the duties attached to a job.

The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 require employers to take appropriate steps to accommodate the needs of employees and prospective employees with disabilities.

Reasonable accommodation can be defined as some modification to the tasks or structure of a job or workplace, which allows the qualified employee with a disability to fully do the job and enjoy equal employment opportunities.

Health and safety:

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 employers must ensure the safety, health and welfare of all employees in their workplace. Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007 special mention is made of employees with disabilities and employers are directed to take their needs into account, particularly with regard to doors, passageways, staircases, showers, washbasins, lavatories and workstations.

Public service quota:

The Disability Act 2005 (Part 5) obliges public bodies to, as far as practicable, take all reasonable measures to support and promote the employment of people with disabilities, and, unless there are good reasons for not doing so, to reach a target 3% of employees with disabilities.

“Supporting an employee who has an MSD”

The type of support a person needs will depend on the type of work they do and how physical it is. Some occupations with heavy labouring may be more difficult to accommodate than less physical jobs.

However, in some circumstances, there may be options for transferring people to less physical work that still uses their skills or allowing some flexibility in the time they spend at specific tasks.



When an employee tells you that they have an MSD, take the earliest opportunity to ask about any problems they are experiencing and consult with an occupational therapist to explore ways to overcome them. Often they can be resolved easily and with little effort. Making modifications sooner rather than later may well be cheaper too, as you can make changes before the problem becomes more costly.

You may need to arrange a workplace assessment to identify problems and potential solutions. With the right support and adjustments, people with MSDs can usually continue in employment.

Finding out what your employee needs: A checklist

Explore the situation with your employee. Identify with them the aspects of their role that they can complete without problems, and which they know or think that they may struggle with. Then identify how certain aspects of commuting to work, existing parking arrangements and doing the job could be done differently. For example, start and finish times might be altered to allow the employee to avoid the rush-hour.

- ④ Decide what actions are needed and who will be responsible.
- ④ Examine the working environment and accessibility, including workplace location, heavy doors and need to use stairs. If you do not have an occupational health nurse, then arrange a work assessment with an occupational therapist or physiotherapist.
- ④ Assess the potential for the employee to continue with their current role. Consider whether adaptations, changes to their working hours, or additional training are necessary and feasible.
- ④ Identify any trial adjustments needed to their role, or identify a (temporary or permanent) potential alternative job. Examine re-training options.
- ④ Agree on what information colleagues should receive and who is responsible for telling them.
- ④ Agree on a communication and review process.



“Supporting your employees: prevention & early intervention”

When drawing up your approach to supporting your employees to minimise workplace ill health and absence, it is essential to consider two key areas: prevention and early intervention.



Prevention

There is a strong link between exposure to the work-related risk factors for MSDs and the development of these disorders. These injuries can be prevented! Taking appropriate steps to eliminate, or reduce exposure to the risk factors, will minimise the risk of MSDs in the workplace. MSD prevention can be simple and inexpensive. Often making straight-forward and basic changes can reduce MSD risks significantly. It is also less expensive to prevent an injury than it is to make changes and corrections after an injury has occurred. Don't wait for an MSD to happen. Taking proactive steps now to reduce your workers' exposure to MSD risk factors will pay off in the future.

Risk assessment

A risk assessment is a careful examination of what could cause harm to people in the workplace. Doing a risk assessment will help employers identify the significant risks in their workplace, and avoid wasted effort by effectively targeting these. A good risk assessment will help avoid accidents and ill health, which can not only be life changing, but can also increase costs to business through lost output, compensation claims and higher insurance premiums.

Risk assessment is a five stage process and involves:

1. **Looking** for the hazards.
2. **Deciding** who might be harmed and how.
3. **Evaluating** the risks and deciding whether the existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done.
4. **Recording** your findings and telling your employees about them.
5. **Reviewing** your assessment and revising it if necessary.

For more information on risk assessment see the Health & Safety Authority's publication "Guide on Prevention and Management."
www.hsa.ie

Your eyes and ears are your best MSD risk identification tools.

In many cases it is easy to see the MSD risks in your workplace. Here are some things to look for:

1. Work that places the elbows above shoulder height, or the hands behind the body.
2. Tasks that call for frequent bending or twisting of the neck.
3. Work requiring frequent or prolonged grasping and holding objects, or frequent wrist movements.
4. Work that requires frequent lifting of items from below knee height or above the shoulders.
5. Work requiring frequent bending or twisting at the waist.
6. Tasks that involve carrying, lifting, pushing or pulling heavy or awkward loads.
7. Spending long periods with a body part held in any one position without movement.

Reducing the risk of MSDs in the workplace

This could mean introducing changes to the work area or tools used, the way work is done, the way the work is organised (breaks and rotation) or the work environment (lighting, temperature).

Basic principles:

- Consider risk when setting up new workstations. It is cheaper than redesigning them or purchasing more suitable tools at a later stage.
- Tackle the serious risks or those that affect a large number of workers first.
- Try to make the task and workstation suitable for each worker, rather than make the worker adapt to fit the task and workstation.
- Test any changes on one or two workers before making changes for everyone.
- Consult your workers.
- Reduce repetition of work tasks.
- Reduce the amount of force and load.
- Reduce duration of time spent on repetitive tasks.
- Improve the working environment.
- Tackle the underlying effects of work on conditions.

Health monitoring & absence analysis

Many employees will develop MSDs during their life time. Most of these conditions will not be directly related to their work but the conditions may affect their ability to do their work. There are things employers can do, to help reduce symptoms and enable staff to stay at work. Health monitoring is an informal, non-statutory method of surveying your workforce for symptoms of ill health, including lower back pain.

This type of occupational health management system can enable you as an employer to be aware of health problems and intervene to prevent them being caused or made worse by certain work activities. Another important role of health monitoring is to feed back into a system that reviews current control methods.

**Look.
Decide.
Evaluate.
Record.
Review.**

Carrying out health monitoring

- Consider the method and frequency of monitoring when planning and implementing control measures.
- Consult employees so that they are fully aware of the monitoring procedures, understand they are in place to help protect their health and that they know their part in them.
- Encourage employees to report symptoms they may be experiencing as early as possible to stop any further aggravation. Having a system in place to do this on a regular basis, such as a brief simple questionnaire, can improve the likelihood that you get this information in the format most useful to you. Ideally, the services of an occupational physician should be engaged to draw up this questionnaire and to review responses.
- Ask employees whether certain elements of their work triggered or exacerbated the problem and whether they can identify what specific task caused the pain.
- There are other things you can do to gain information on the incidence of MSDs in your workforce. These include: using administrative resources such as reviewing entries in the accident book, sickness absence records, staff turnover etc. Although this information is already available, you may need to interpret it.
- If workers are reporting symptoms, consider a referral to an occupational health provider or suggest they see their GP to get treatment.

When you have gathered all the available information, it is important that you interpret this data and look for patterns in:

- comments from employees
- symptoms reported
- existing risk factors
- results of surveys



Go to Appendix 1 for an example of a medical certificate

Reviewing health monitoring

Reviewing the results of health monitoring provides an opportunity to look at the overall performance of your risk management control systems and may identify people who have been or may be at risk of developing an MSD. This process should be considered as an integral part of the management process.

An effective review is an opportunity to learn from experience gained in managing risk factors, signs and symptoms.

- It helps determine whether interventions are working.
- Establishes whether risks have been controlled where reasonably practicable.
- Provides an opportunity to assess whether new control measures need to, or should, be introduced.

If, as a result of health monitoring, it looks like your controls may be deficient or not fit for purpose, you should review your risk assessment accordingly. You may need professional help and advice on this.

Sickness absence analysis

Find out to what extent workers are reporting MSD pain symptoms and how much sickness absence is due to MSD problems. You may need to look at how you record and monitor sickness absence. This information will show whether you need to apply further preventative measures.

Patterns may emerge that identify difficulties with specific jobs. You should review your risk assessments if this is the case.

**You can help
rehabilitate
your
employee.**

**Change the
way work is
organised.**

Awareness & training

Given that MSDs are the most common cause of work absence, managers need to have the skills to deal with staff that have them, or the costs to their organisation may be significant. Yet many employers remain unaware of the nature of MSDs, both in terms of the immediate impact and on their functional capacity at work. Therefore, awareness and training form an essential component in the prevention of MSDs in the workplace.

Managers are in the front line of staff absence and with the right training, are in a good position to spot the early warning signs of a problem, where it is feasible, and to help rehabilitate employees after a period away from work.

Managerial awareness-raising and training is essential to increase understanding of sickness absence issues and their ability to respond competently and rapidly.

Early intervention

The impact of MSDs can be significant, to the people living with them, to you as an employer and to society as a whole.

Early intervention is an essential part of addressing the onset of MSDs and the work absence caused by these conditions. It is crucial to individual recovery and self-management, and to reducing the number of working days lost and reduced productivity caused by MSDs.

Intervene early. Employers should always take action sooner rather than later because caution and delay can only make matters worse. It is recommended that interventions to assist a healthy return to work are commenced within the first four weeks of work absence. As long as employers treat employees with respect and make evidence-based or best-practice decisions, early intervention cannot be construed as harassment and can often hasten recovery or rehabilitation.

If the negative effects of MSDs on both quality of life and work disability are to be minimised, then early diagnosis and treatment can often be critical. Once the employer is on notice that an employee has an MSD, it is advisable for the employer to encourage the employee to seek treatment early.

It is also important to stress that effective management by an employer can be important in the general rehabilitation process.



The role of the line manager

What is clear is that the role of line managers in early intervention is crucial, in both retaining the employee in the workplace and in rehabilitation. Yet, many line managers feel ill-equipped to manage long-term absence and incapacity. They may find aspects difficult to discuss with employees and may be concerned about getting the right balance when addressing MSDs or work absence. Discussions with employees can occur through normal management processes, such as regular work strategy sessions, appraisals or informal progress chats. These provide opportunities to discuss any problems an employee may be having. At all times, in the language used and the attention given, it should be clear to the employee that they are being treated with respect.

Following the first communication regarding difficulties related to MSDs, schedule a follow up date to see how they are coping and if further adjustments or assistance are required.

Discuss.
Engage.
Understand.
Follow Up.
Support.

The use of open questions, such as

“How are you doing at the moment?”

or

“Is there anything that we could do to help?”

can help the employee express any concerns they may be experiencing. Questions should be neutral and you should give the employee time to answer.

Other opportunities to open up communication can come about when dealing with absence. In particular, it is good practice to have a return to work interview, whether the absence has been brief or long-term. For short absences, it can be a quick, informal chat that gives you an opportunity to check how someone is getting on.

It is important that you engage in systematic monitoring of work absence behaviour to detect longer-term or repeated absences as early as possible. You then need to manage those affected by providing as much retention support or access to relevant supports as is practicable.

Employer & GP Dialogue

Many of the work challenges faced by employees with MSDs may be improved if there was a better level of mutual understanding between employers and GPs. Most employers have limited understanding of MSDs and, similarly, many GPs have limited appreciation of the vocational or occupational dimension of many MSDs. Without this understanding of specific tasks undertaken by employees and the ability to adjust those tasks, GPs may feel that a return to work would exacerbate a condition unless an individual is 100% fit.

The consequence of this mutual lack of understanding is often that the MSD employee is left stranded in the middle, with no clear pathway back to work.

For their part, employers will only very rarely question a GP's sick note, or ask for a second opinion on the potential for a beneficial return to work for an employee. If sick notes from GPs are not providing a clear indication of the nature of the health problem an employee has, and its impact on their ability to work, employers should seek clarification on the GP's assessment.

This will help understand which tasks the employee can still perform or what support they may need if they return to work after an absence. **Appendix 1** gives an example of a medical certificate that could be used to give more information to the employee and the employer regarding the interventions that might be undertaken to support a return to work.



Occupational health services

If you are concerned because significant numbers of your workers are affected by MSD problems, or lengthy spells of sickness absence due to MSD pain, you could develop schemes to tackle this, such as early access to advice from occupational health professionals.

The benefits of using occupational health services can include:

- reducing the worker's pain and difficulty
- reducing the time it takes for a worker to recover and return to work
- improving productivity and morale
- reducing costs of absence

There is evidence to suggest that the benefits of providing early access to advice, extra help where appropriate and managing return to work outweigh the costs, when return to work from back pain is approached in a structured way.

An Occupational Health Service could be used for workers with MSD symptoms who are still at work or any who are on sick leave:

- Occupational health professionals with experience of MSD problems and workplace situations (occupational therapists, physiotherapists or other appropriate health professionals) are able to assess and advise.
- MSD problems can be specific to an individual and each person is different and will need to be dealt with on a case by case basis.

- If a task is causing or contributing to an MSD, the worker may need to stop doing that task for a time or temporarily modify their duties to assist with recovery.
- The occupational health professional will be able to highlight any work factors that are causing difficulty and should liaise with supervisors or managers, if necessary, in order to help the person stay at work or return to work.
- Some cases will require monitoring by occupational health professionals with a review of progress at regular intervals.
- Some individuals, such as those with a serious condition or serious injury, may be under the care of their GP or hospital specialist. While they are absent from work long term, occupational health professionals will be in a position to liaise with the GP or specialist to gain further information on the diagnosis and the plans for medical management, including time frames. This will enable you to plan your work and arrange for cover as needed.

Capacity not incapacity

Focus on capacity not incapacity. Quite often both employers and GPs will focus on the aspects of the job which an employee with an MSD cannot currently perform, rather than on those which they can. Most workers with MSDs can continue to make a great contribution at work. A capability-focused approach to vocational rehabilitation is the most effective approach to take in the majority of work-related MSD cases.

Job design & adjustments

Imaginative job design may assist rehabilitation. Managers can change the way work is organised (including simple changes to working time arrangements where practicable) to help prevent MSDs getting worse and to help people with MSDs to return to work. Ideally, any work reorganisation that is possible would take account of job quality and ergonomic good practice.

The law requires you to take appropriate steps to accommodate the needs of employees and prospective employees with disabilities (**see page 11**).



What is “reasonable accommodation”?

Many people with MSDs never need workplace adjustments, but the legislation provides for employees with disabilities to ask their employer for reasonable adjustments to their job. These adjustments are to make sure the job is no harder to do than it would be for someone who doesn't have a disability. An occupational therapist or occupational health physician can advise on the need for such adjustments, sourcing and installation, if so required.

Many adjustments relevant to people with MSDs are not expensive - some cost nothing at all - and might include the following:

- enabling an employee to take more regular breaks
- providing a place where an employee can rest for short periods during the working day
- ensuring work station (i.e. desk/chair/monitor/key-board/work surface heights) is equipped and adjusted for an employee's needs
- exemption from extended or night work shifts
- flexible or reduced working hours, allowing for late starts / finish, where this is feasible
- allocation of a steady stream of work, giving opportunity for pacing, avoiding last minute deadlines where possible
- allowing change in work schedule for occasional medical appointments
- assigning an employee to a different role, where this is feasible and the employee has the relevant skills required
- arranging for meetings to be held at a suitable time or place to suit the employee
- a flexible working pattern which enables the employee to do some of their work from home, where the nature of their work lends itself to this arrangement
- allocating a car space to an employee in close proximity to the work entrance
- improving physical accessibility e.g. hand rails at step sites / ramps if using a wheelchair

You are not obliged to provide anything that the person would normally provide for themselves. For example, you would not be expected to provide hearing aids for a person with impaired hearing. You might not have to provide these types of appropriate measures if it meant that you would suffer a ‘disproportionate burden’.

What is 'reasonable'?

When considering whether an adjustment is 'reasonable', you can take into account:

- how effective it would be in improving the situation
- its potential to improve productivity
- its potential to reduce the chance of sickness absence
- its cost
- how feasible it is
- the availability of resources (money, equipment and people)
- the type of activity a business undertakes
- how long the employee has worked or is likely to work for the organisation
- the size of the organisation

There are a number of options available to employers to support the cost of such accommodations. Many of these grants are available for the purpose of promoting the work retention of employees with disabilities and it is important that these are explored. **(see page 31 for more information).**

You should invite your employee to play an active role in discussing arrangements and you might want to speak to someone with expertise in providing work-related help for people with disabilities, such as an occupational therapist or occupational health physician.

Finding out what your employee needs: A checklist

Explore the situation with your employee. Identify with them the aspects of their role that they can complete without problems and which they know or think that they may struggle with. Then identify how these could be done differently, including travel to work (missing the rush-hour) and location of parking space in relation to the office/ workplace.

- Decide what actions are needed and who will be responsible.
- Examine the working environment and accessibility, including workplace location, heavy doors and need to use stairs. If you do not have an occupational health nurse then arrange a work assessment with an occupational therapist or physiotherapist.
- Assess the potential for the employee to continue with their current role. Consider whether adaptations, changes to their working hours, or additional training are necessary.
- Identify any trial adjustments needed to their role, or identify a potential alternative job (temporary or permanent). Examine re-training options.
- Agree on what information colleagues should receive and who is responsible for telling them.
- Agree on a communication and review process.

Return to Work

The longer a worker is off work with an MSD, the less likely it becomes that they will return. However, by encouraging early intervention and putting in place measures to accommodate the employee's return to work, you can avoid losing workers through long-term sickness.

- Agree with the employee that you will maintain regular contact with them during their absence so you can help them stay motivated and prepare them for their return.
- Prepare and agree a return to work plan (based on expert medical opinion) with a goal for the individual to be back doing their original job after a certain period of time.
- A return to work plan could, if practicable, provide helpful transitional work arrangements that may include a gradual increase in hours or allowing more time for certain tasks to be completed.
- Consider modifying the job, work system or workstation if this is feasible and would help.
- Sometimes simple adjustments can significantly help the individual concerned.

Not only has evidence shown that work is good for a person but returning to modified work, where this is an option, can help with your employee's recovery.

“Communicating about the situation”

Many employees feel anxious about telling employers about their condition. But since it is hard to help if the diagnosis is kept secret, it is in the employer's interest to encourage people to disclose a disability or health condition that may affect their ability to do their role. An organisational policy which gives guidance on who to contact and how this might be done – assuring confidentiality – is an encouragement.



Having transparent and easy-to-find policies on sickness absence and absence management can help employees feel comfortable in their situation. If an employee does want to discuss their condition, it might be helpful to invite them to be accompanied at the meeting. An occupational health nurse or occupational therapist will be able to provide further information on the condition and its implications for employment. They can also be a valuable support in terms of assessing the employee's work ability and assisting with the identification of work supports, if any, which may promote functional performance and output.

At certain times, such as shortly after diagnosis, after a relapse, or at the onset of new or recurring symptoms, people with MSDs may feel vulnerable, unsure of their own abilities and reluctant to talk about their future. Persuading someone not to make an important decision at such a time may be part of the employer's role. It is important to remember that the majority of people with MSDs can achieve good symptom control through a combination of pharmacological, medical, healthcare and self-management approaches.

Confidentiality is clearly essential. If an employee has chosen to share information with you, it does not mean they have told anyone else. An employer will be aware of their obligations under Data Protection legislation and will ensure that this trust is not broken.

But it could be helpful to discuss with the employee whether and how colleagues might be informed of their condition – and how you can support them in this. An occupational therapist or nurse can provide helpful advice and support in this area.

Some people will tell their employer as soon as they are diagnosed, while others prefer to take their time and come to terms with the news. Whatever the circumstances, for most people, this will not be an easy conversation. It makes all the difference to have the understanding of their employer. As well as the difficulties of coping with a life-changing diagnosis, people may have feelings of guilt if their performance at work has recently been affected. They will be uncertain about their future health and perhaps about their rights at work. Employers can help greatly by taking a supportive approach at this difficult time.

**Discuss & agree.
Have review meetings.**

**Let the employee know
who they can talk to.**

Tips for dealing with disclosure

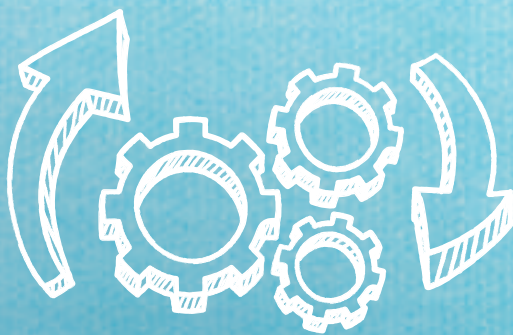
Practise good people management in communicating with your employee, particularly ensuring that they have and understand all the relevant company policies and how these apply to their situation.

- When an employee has told you that they have an MSD, they may want to inform their colleagues or they may prefer to keep it confidential. If they wish their colleagues to be informed, discuss and agree jointly the best way to go about this.
- Let the employee know who they can talk to if they need support or if their situation changes.
- Involve occupational health or other health professionals if more specific support / assessment is required.
- Agree a series of review meetings with your employee that enable you to discuss any support or adjustments they may need. It is also important that you seek guidance from the company doctor or an occupational health professional.



“Support & resources”

Finding and keeping capable, experienced staff that you can rely on is important to all employers. If your company has an occupational health nurse, they are the starting point for support. If not, there are many external sources of medical advice and other expert guidance, on the law, making adjustments, work assessments and good practice.



Support Schemes from the Department of Social Protection

There are a number of support schemes available to you if a member of your staff acquires a disability or if you hire a new staff member who has a disability. These employment supports are provided by the Department of Social Protection.

Workplace/Equipment Adaptation Scheme

Grant assistance is available for employers, employees and self-employed people who need to adapt the workplace or purchase specialised equipment for staff with disabilities. You can apply for the grant if the person with the disability is already employed or is about to be employed by you.

Examples of adaptations for which a grant may be given include:

- Minor building modifications (ramps or modified toilets)
- Stair lifts
- Special chairs and keyboards

Public sector employers are obliged to facilitate the needs of their staff with disabilities and are therefore not entitled to claim this grant. They are required to make these services available from their own resources.

The maximum amount of grant aid is €6,348.70 towards the cost of adapting or purchasing equipment. You should be aware, however, that you are not entitled to make an application for grant assistance each year.

For more information see
www.welfare.ie

Employee Retention Grant Scheme

This is a scheme that aims to assist employers to retain employees who acquire an illness, condition or impairment that affects their ability to carry out their job. The scheme is part of the Department of Social Protection's Reasonable Accommodation Fund and it aims to maintain a person's employability by providing funding to:

- Retrain them so that you can take up another position within the company
- Identify accommodation, such as work equipment adaptation, and/or training to enable them to remain in their current position.

The scheme is open to every company in the private sector. Any existing employee (working at any level in the organisation) who acquires an illness, condition or disability that affects his or her job is covered under this scheme. Public sector employers are not eligible to apply for these grants.

€6,348.70
maximum amount
of grant aid towards
equipment

Funding under this scheme is made available in 2 stages:

Stage 01:

Assists employers by allowing them to hire expert skills from outside the company to develop a written individual retention strategy for any employee who acquires a disability. The retention strategy could set out steps needed to accommodate and, if necessary, train the employee to remain in their role. Alternatively, the retention strategy could outline where the employee could be re-deployed in the company and the accommodation/re-training needed to do this. Under the scheme, 90% of the programme costs are paid (up to a maximum amount of €2,500 for each employee).

Stage 02:

Provides funding to the employer towards the implementation of the written retention strategy. This will include grant aid towards re-training, job coaching and/or hiring an external co-ordinator to oversee the way the individual retention strategy is implemented. Funding of 90% of eligible costs to a maximum of €12,500 can be paid.

Disability Awareness Training Scheme

This scheme is aimed at employers that provide this training and helps raise awareness of disability issues in the workplace. Disability awareness also addresses the concerns and misconceptions that employers and employees may have about working with people with disabilities. The scheme is funded under the Department of Social Protection's Reasonable Accommodation Fund and is open to all companies in the private sector.

Grant assistance of 90% of the eligible training programme costs (up to a maximum of €20,000 in any one calendar year) is available to your organisation for the first year of training. After this first year, 80% of eligible training programme costs are covered (to a maximum of €20,000 in any one calendar year).

Wage Subsidy Scheme

This is a scheme that offers financial support for employers who employ certain people with disabilities on a full-time basis (21 hours or more). The scheme is one of the workplace supports for employers provided by the Department Social Protection to encourage the employment of people with disabilities. (Public service employers or any employers or schemes where wages are funded by the Department are not eligible for this scheme).

Sometimes the nature of a disability can restrict an employee's productivity in comparison with other staff, irrespective of his or her ability to do a job. In situations where this restriction results in a loss of productivity for the employer, the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) allows the employer make up the shortfall through grant assistance.

For more information see
www.welfare.ie

“Useful contacts”

Arthritis Ireland

National organisation that works to transform the experience of people living with arthritis through the provision of a broad range of supports and services.

Tel: LoCall 1890 252 846

Web: www.arthritisireland.ie

Association of Occupational Therapists in Ireland (AOTI)

The professional body for occupational therapists in Ireland.

Tel: (01) 874 8136

Web: www.aoti.ie

Citizens Information Board

Provides information on public services and entitlements in Ireland.

Tel: 0761 07 4000

Web: www.citizensinformation.ie

Department of Social Protection

A department of the Government whose mission is to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and other services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families.

Web: www.welfare.ie

Faculty of Occupational Medicine

Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

The professional and training body for occupational medicine in Ireland that seeks to ensure the highest standards in the practice of occupational medicine.

Tel: (01) 863 9700

Web: www.rcpi.ie

Health & Safety Authority

National statutory body with responsibility for ensuring that all workers (employed and self-employed) and those affected by work activity are protected from work related injury and ill-health.

LoCall: 1890 289 389

Web: www.hsa.ie

IASE (Irish Association of Supported Employment)

National voluntary organisation promoting supported employment for people with disabilities.

Tel: (097) 82894

Web: www.iase.ie

Irish Association of Occupational Medicine (IAOM)

The representative and educational body for occupational physicians and doctors with an interest in occupational medicine.

Email: isomsec@gmail.com

Web: www.iaomirl.com

Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP)

The professional body of chartered physiotherapists in Ireland.

Tel: (01) 402 2148

Web: www.iscp.ie

National Disability Authority

Ireland's independent state body providing expert advice on disability policy and practice to Government.

Tel: (01) 608 0400

Web: www.nda.ie

Appendix 1



MEDICAL CERTIFICATE

Dr. Name			
Medical Centre address			
This certificate states that (full name & address)			
Date of examination		Date of certificate	
To whom it may concern			
Further interventions that may support rehabilitation to work:			
a. Medical treatment therapy (please specify)	c. Occupational Health Opinion	yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
b. Work accommodations (please specify)	d. Consultation with HR / Line management	yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Other comments			

Signed Dr.
MCRN



Fit for Work Ireland
c/o Arthritis Ireland
1 Clanwilliam Square
Grand Canal Quay
Dublin 2

Web www.fitforwork.ie
Email fitforwork@arthritisisireland.ie
Tel 01 661 8188