

Demystifying Workplace Accommodation

A guide for people with psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis (PsA)

Canadian
Psoriasis
Network



Réseau
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du psoriasis



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Have you experienced difficulties at work because of psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis (PsA)? Do you understand your rights and responsibilities in accessing workplace support? This guide will help you learn about getting workplace support and navigating workplace accommodation to bring your best to work. We crowdsourced much of this information directly from people living with psoriasis or PsA—close to 200 people shared their experiences through a recent survey.

What are typical work challenges for people with psoriasis or PsA?

People living with psoriasis and PsA can experience challenges at work. Over 50% of survey participants said that psoriasis and PsA had a negative impact at work. When it comes to performing job tasks, they identified these challenges:

1. Reporting to work at the scheduled time due to fatigue.
2. Concentration was affected by itching.
3. Staying focused due to pain.
4. Staying focused due to stress.
5. Staying focused due to fatigue.
6. Difficulties performing physical tasks, like standing.
7. Location of psoriasis plaques affected work, e.g., hands or feet.

Mental health continues to be a critical challenge for people with psoriasis or PsA. Over 50% of survey participants worried that psoriasis or PsA will affect their current and future employment and felt upset or angry about how the condition affects them at work. Research suggests that self-esteem, shame, and anger can negatively affect work productivity ([Pearce, 2013](#)) so it's important to recognize that mental health

is just as important to manage as other symptoms.

Some people with psoriasis or PsA said they felt they were treated differently (20%) by their supervisor, clients, or coworkers. Other issues were focused on supervisors; some people (20%) felt their supervisors didn't understand and support their health needs. This can change depending on the job, supervisor, and colleagues. Close to 30% of survey participants said that someone at work made inconsiderate remarks about their psoriasis or PsA.

It can also be difficult to manage the ups and downs of psoriasis and PsA flares. This brings added challenges to adapt workplace support. Some supervisors, clients, and coworkers understand and support needs relating to psoriasis and/or PsA, while others do not (33% of survey participants).

Useful resources:

[Arthritis in the Workplace: Resources for Patients, by Patients](#)

[Working with a rheumatic disease: an interactive tool for youth and young adults](#)

How can workplace challenges be addressed?

Workplace challenges can be addressed by changing or adapting the work environment or working conditions to better support you. These adaptations or changes are called **workplace accommodations**. In Canada, there are laws that require employers to offer reasonable workplace accommodations for people with disabilities in the workplace. Accessing these needed supports can help you stay productive and healthy ([Gignac, 2015](#)).

Employers in Canada are required to follow human rights legislation that outlines the **duty to accommodate**. It often applies to people with disabilities (like psoriasis or PsA) but also applies in other circumstances, such as age, family status, race, gender identity, etc. These laws require employers to remove barriers that have a negative impact on employees protected under these laws to the point where it causes **undue hardship**, like costs, health, and safety. When considering requests for accommodation, a number of factors are considered under human rights law. For example, significant financial costs, the size and resources of the employer, disruption of operations, morale problems of other employees that could result from using the accommodation, and substantial interference with the rights of other employees.

Employers are required to implement reasonable workplace accommodations to allow employees to do their jobs to the best of their ability. Many workplace accommodations are simple and affordable. However, if there are costs to implementing workplace accommodation, employers are responsible for paying for these costs. For example, a workplace accommodation includes providing a flexible start time for work or working from home a portion of the time. However, an employer can decide to not accommodate if the job requirement is considered a bona fide occupational requirement. This means that the requirement is essential for the job, put in place with good intentions, and connected

to the job. However, an employer cannot decide to not accommodate because it is not convenient.

Useful resources:

[ARCH Disability Law—My Rights at Work: Limits to the duty to accommodate in Ontario](#)

[ARCH Disability Law Fact Sheet—My Rights at Work: Requests for disability-related accommodation in Ontario](#)

[L'accommodement raisonnable \(Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse\)](#)

When can workplace accommodations be used?

Workplace accommodations can be put in place at any time and can be permanent or temporary. For example, if you are flaring, you may need different workplace accommodations, however the type of support needed may change when you are feeling well again. You may also wish to speak with your supervisor before a flare occurs to plan ahead and determine what accommodations are needed during periods when your psoriasis or PsA is stable and what is needed when these conditions are flaring. If you have been away from work due to illness, it is important to communicate the need for accommodation to your supervisor or employer. Typically, a gradual return to work is used to ensure adjustments can be made based on how well you are feeling.

What is the process for accessing workplace accommodation?

The process for accessing workplace accommodation will be different depending on the processes used by your employer. It could be as simple as having a conversation with your supervisor who can implement the changes immediately, or it might

involve multiple discussions, documentation from your medical specialist, and completing several forms. In general, there are **five main steps** to prepare and request workplace accommodation and these steps are explained in the following section.

Step 1: Research human resources policies and processes

To start off, it's important to become informed about human resources policies (if you work for a large organization), to review applicable laws, and to see if your organization has a process for workplace accommodation requests. Start by looking at the internal website for human resources policies and forms that might be used (typical for large organizations) or there might also be bulletin boards in the workplace that have some of this information. If you are a union member, you may wish to speak privately with the local union steward to learn about workplace processes and practices. Human resources staff might also be helpful but please be aware that they are representatives of the employer or management.

Step 2: Prepare for a discussion with a supervisor or employer representative

It is important to plan for a discussion with your supervisor, or employer representative, and to be prepared to advocate for your needs. Think about your limitations and restrictions at work, and ask yourself:

- Are the symptoms of psoriasis or PsA having an impact on completing job tasks?
- Are there any work tasks that are difficult to do because of psoriasis or PsA? For example, standing, concentrating due to fatigue, or reporting to work at a certain time.
- Are there aspects of the job where you aren't performing to an acceptable standard due to psoriasis or PsA? If so, what should change?

If you could change two or three things about work, what would they be?

For example, you may have difficulties with grasping or fine motor coordination, difficulty standing for long periods of time, or difficulties concentrating due to stress and anxiety. Your dermatologist, rheumatologist, occupational therapist or other health care professional can also assist in identifying limitations and restrictions and the impact they have on the job.

Step 3: Identify workplace accommodations

Now that you have a clear sense of workplace challenges, you can research what changes are needed at work. Based on our survey, people with psoriasis and PsA identified the following effective workplace accommodations (presented in order of helpfulness):

1. Paid time to attend medical appointments.
2. Flexible hours of work (e.g., report to work later).
3. Breaks to give their body/joints time to recover.
4. Working from home one or more days a week.
5. Reduced work hours.
6. Better physical layout (e.g., stools, desks, workspaces).
7. Using heating and ventilation equipment (e.g., space heaters or coolers, vent covers).
8. Modifying work tasks.
9. Equipment (e.g., voice to text software).

Research also suggests that the accommodations mentioned above can be helpful as well as other accommodations like job-sharing, modified schedules, and special equipment and adaptations. ([Gignac, 2014](#), [Jetha, 2018](#)).

Useful resources:

[Job Accommodation Network—information on skin condition*](#)

[Job Accommodation Network—information on arthritis*](#)

[Job Accommodation Network—information on mental health conditions*](#)

* These resources were developed by a U.S. based organization and information concerning law and policy may differ from those in Canada.

Step 4: Decide what to share or disclose with a supervisor or employer representative

Deciding what information to share and when to share it is a personal decision that only you can make. Remember that you don't need to disclose your health condition(s) to access workplace accommodations. Employers can only ask for information about functional limitations and restrictions that affect you at work due to your disability. You don't need to share everything about living with these conditions. However, here are a few additional factors to consider:

- What is the work environment like? Are relationships positive, or sometimes difficult? What effect might this have on your request?
- Does your employer have a formal policy for supporting people with disabilities? Look for policies on employment equity, diversity or inclusion and see what they say.
- Has your employer ever made changes to the workplace for people with disabilities? If so, how well were these changes made?
- What are you **personally** comfortable sharing? What is comfortable for one person may not be what is comfortable to another.

Also, disclosing information is not a one-time event. You may be more comfortable sharing small bits of information to assess the reaction of your

supervisor or employer representative.

[This disclosure tool](#) can help guide you through the process.

Step 5: Speak with your supervisor or employer representative

To request workplace accommodations, you will need to discuss the request with your supervisor or employer representative. Remember that this will be an ongoing dialogue and there may be several conversations to discuss your needs and possible workplace accommodations. It's important to come prepared for a discussion with your supervisor, for example:

- Clearly communicate the need for workplace accommodation, e.g., "I am having some health issues and feel changes are needed at work to help me better manage my health and be effective at work."
- Communicate the top two or three workplace limitations or restrictions.
- Suggest the most helpful accommodations that will work for you.
- Consider the costs of the workplace accommodations and how it fits with work activities.
- Share what you are comfortable disclosing about your health status and limitations.
- Suggest an accommodation plan be developed, preferably in writing.
- Monitor the accommodation process to ensure it meets your needs.
- Have regular discussions with your supervisor or employer representative about workplace needs.

The supervisor or employer has final decision-making authority in deciding what accommodations are implemented but they need to involve you in the discussion. You can play an important role by shaping the discussion and communicating your needs as clearly as possible.

What are my responsibilities in the accommodation process?

As an employee, your main responsibilities start with identifying and communicating the need for accommodations. You also need to:

- Answer questions or provide information about restrictions and limitations. This might mean you need to get documentation about restrictions and limitations from your health care professional(s), however it depends on the process used by your employer
- Actively contribute to discussions about accommodation solutions
- Work with your supervisor to implement the accommodations and monitor the accommodation process to ensure it meets your needs
- Inform your supervisor of any changes to accommodation needs, for example, a flare may change the kind of workplace supports needed

The employer may offer an accommodation that is different from what is requested. The laws in Canada say that **reasonable** accommodations must be provided, and this will be different from one employer to another, or the specifics of the situation. If you are not satisfied with the accommodation offered, you can ask for an explanation and communicate why the accommodations offered will not address your concerns, and how the accommodations you suggested will address them. If you are a union member, you can seek the assistance of your union representative to assist with this process. For non-union members, concerns should be made in writing to the employer's human resources department or designate. If your employer refuses to provide the accommodation requested, they must still work with you to find a reasonable alternative. If a solution is still not reached, employees may have grounds to file a human rights complaint or, in union settings, a grievance against the employer.

What are the employer's responsibilities?

Your employer is required to provide reasonable workplace accommodations based on the grounds noted in human rights laws, including disability, age, and family status. This begins when the employer is made aware of your need for accommodation, or there are circumstances where they should have known that an employee's performance has been impacted by an underlying medical issue. For example, the duty to inquire requires that employers take proactive steps to ascertain whether an employee is struggling with mental health issues. The duty to inquire requires employers to take note of any significant behaviour changes, increased absences, increased frustration, or decrease in work performance. The employer must also keep accommodation requests private and confidential and monitor that accommodation needs are being met on an ongoing basis.

This resource was developed by Laurie Proulx, human resource consultant and patient advocate.