



# Social prescribing and musculoskeletal conditions

A guide for link workers and  
social prescribing services

# Foreword

Arthritis Action is proud to be a sponsor of the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance's (ARMA) new social prescribing resources. Within these pages, you will find valuable information and resources for link workers who want to make a real difference in their work. Musculoskeletal (MSK) health is of vital importance to people in the UK, with over 18.8 million people living with some form of musculoskeletal condition in the country. During this time where the NHS is more stretched than ever before, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is now even more important for us to champion the importance of self-management of musculoskeletal health and help people live healthier, happier lives.

As a social prescriber, you have the potential to make a lasting difference to the lives of people with MSK conditions. However, you are not alone in this endeavour. Patient organisations like Arthritis Action, alongside other members of ARMA, are committed to addressing the physical and mental health symptoms of living with MSK conditions and are here to help you however we can. Our vision is for all people to live active and healthy lives, free from the impact of arthritis and other MSK conditions. These new resources from ARMA can help us all move one step closer to achieving this goal.

It is now well known that MSK conditions are the leading cause of pain and disability nationwide, however there's still so much that we can do to help those affected. By keeping people informed with the latest information, you can change their lives for the better by helping to build their knowledge and confidence, and to take control of their condition.

We hope that these resources prove useful to you, and that their contents help you to make a difference to people's lives across the UK.

**Shantel Irwin**  
**CEO Arthritis Action**



# Introduction

As a link worker you will see many people with Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions such as back pain or arthritis. MSK conditions are more common than diabetes and heart disease combined. Yet they often do not get the attention they deserve, given the huge impact the resulting pain and lack of mobility can have on a person's life. Healthy bones, joints and muscles are fundamental to our ability to move, be active, work and engage in activities we enjoy. MSK health underpins our ability to live healthy and independent lives.

As a social prescriber you have the potential to make a big difference to the lives of people with MSK conditions. Some social prescribing services have a specific offer for people with MSK conditions. This resource is aimed at social prescribers without a specific MSK service to help you use social prescribing to make a difference.

Many people with MSK conditions also have other long-term conditions. Four out of five people with osteoarthritis have at least one other long-term condition such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease or depression. Pain, mental health and disability are strongly linked, so not recognising or treating one can impact the others greatly. Anxiety and depression are more common in people with MSK conditions. Anxiety and depression will also make people's pain worse.

Very often a person's MSK condition may not be seen as the most important issue by clinicians. Older people or those who have had the condition a long time may also minimise the impact it has and feel that it is just something they have to live with.

MSK conditions can have a big impact on people's ability to manage other long-term conditions. Tasks such as grasping small objects, standing, sitting or moving around can be more difficult. This can make taking pills, eating a healthy diet, being active and engaging in hobbies and interests harder. If these challenges are not recognised, then people's other health conditions may not be managed as effectively.

A significant amount of the impact of common MSK conditions is also preventable. So even though your client may not have MSK conditions now, you can help reduce the chances of future MSK problems.

Understanding MSK conditions, their prevention and their impact, and thinking about this when you meet clients, will mean you can make a big difference to people's health and their lives. By raising the issue you can also become a champion for the importance of MSK health.



# Part 1: About musculoskeletal health

The term musculoskeletal conditions includes a broad range of health conditions affecting the bones, joints, muscles and spine. Common symptoms include pain, stiffness and a loss of mobility and dexterity.

According to Versus Arthritis' State of MSK 2021 report, there are over 20 million people now living with an MSK condition in the UK. These conditions are the biggest cause of years lived with disability and one of the two biggest causes of lost work days. The impact on individuals, society, the NHS and the economy is significant.

MSK conditions affect people of all ages. The onset of inflammatory conditions tends to be in childhood or younger adults. Osteoporosis and osteoarthritis are more common in later life, although often starting before retirement age.

MSK conditions fall into three broad categories:

- Inflammatory conditions: e.g. rheumatoid arthritis, axial spondyloarthritis (including ankylosing spondyloarthritis), gout, juvenile idiopathic arthritis.
- Conditions of musculoskeletal pain: e.g. osteoarthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia, connective tissue disorders.
- Osteoporosis: a condition where your bones lose strength, making you more likely to break a bone.

## COVID and MSK health

Like other long-term conditions, the pandemic has had an impact on MSK health in a number of ways. People with long term conditions have found it harder to access the support they needed. At times during the pandemic services would see only urgent and emergency cases, hydrotherapy pools were closed, and people have been unable to get appointments even when their condition has worsened. Swimming pools and classes such as yoga and tai chi were also closed. Social prescribing can help those people whose conditions which are more difficult to manage as a result.

Many people's MSK health deteriorated as a result of lockdowns and home working. Unsuitable home working arrangements have led to an increase in neck and shoulder pain. A combination of lockdown and lack of commuting has meant that many people have been less active, impacting their MSK health. This is particularly true of people who were shielding and instructed not to leave their home at all. This deconditioning has included reduced muscle strength and balance, increasing risks of falls and fractures.

Some people with inflammatory conditions are also taking medication which is immunosuppressant. This leaves them more vulnerable to the virus and less likely to mount a strong response to the vaccine. New variants bring worries about the increased risk of contracting the virus and many are concerned that their vaccination may not have been effective. You can find information about this on the relevant patient organisations' websites such as <https://www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/vaccines-for-covid-19-your-questions-answered//>

## Health inequalities

There are significant MSK health inequalities. Some conditions are more prevalent in women than men, more common in people living in areas of deprivation or in particular ethnic groups.

- Women are 2-3 times more likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis compared to men yet less likely to experience remission.
- Among people aged 45–64, the prevalence of arthritis is more than double in the most deprived areas (21.5%) compared to the least deprived areas (10.6%).
- Prevalence of chronic pain is significantly higher in people from a black ethnic group than other ethnic groups – 44% compared with 34%.

A whole range of social and cultural factors will impact on people's experience of MSK conditions. If you believe that back pain is a sign of serious damage you may avoid movement and try to rest, when for most back pain, keeping moving is the best approach. If you live alone and feel isolated and lonely, motivating yourself to move when in pain will be much more difficult than if moving is a way to engage in activity you enjoy. If you spend a lot of time juggling work, child care and managing on a low budget you will find it harder to look after your MSK health, attend appointments and take time off work for treatment.

Many people with MSK conditions have experienced clinicians not listening to them when they talk about their pain or dismissing it as psychological (this is especially true for women). People living in more deprived areas are less likely to be able to access safe outdoor spaces such as parks, may live further from the services they need and will have fewer voluntary organisations in their local area providing support and services.

## Menopause

It is important to be aware that MSK conditions can be associated with the menopause. It is well known that menopause brings an increased risk of osteoporosis. Joint aches and pains and muscle stiffness due to hormonal changes can also be symptoms of menopause.

## Children and young people

Whilst MSK conditions are more common in older age, children and young people do experience arthritis. There are a number of conditions such as Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis, scoliosis, hip dysplasia and hypermobility syndromes. Even if your service does not cover children and young people under 18, you may be supporting parents of children with long term MSK conditions. As with any other long term childhood condition this can cause stress, anxiety and have a significant impact on the whole family. Many of the patient organisations listed in this guide support children and young people. The CCAA, Kids with Arthritis and JIA at NRAS support children, young people and families with Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis.

## Key points to help people manage



Keep active even though this can be difficult if you are in pain



Peer support – signpost to groups and organisations where you can meet people with the same condition



Mental health – conditions which cause pain and reduced mobility can cut people off from their friends, family and social networks and cause depression and anxiety. Supporting people to engage with social activities they enjoy and where needed engage them with services such as IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies).

# Part 2: Self managing MSK conditions

Those living with long term MSK conditions will need support to manage their symptoms. Many patient organisations provide on line self management support resources as well as local support groups.

- [Arthritis Action Online Self-Management Resource.](#)
- [National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society Managing my AS.](#)
- [National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society SMILE programme.](#)
- [Versus Arthritis managing your symptoms.](#)

## Physical activity

The human musculoskeletal system was designed to move; it was not designed to sit at a desk all day. Being active is the best way to maintain MSK health from childhood to older age.

Keeping active is also helpful when managing MSK conditions and, for some conditions, is an essential part of treatment. People with MSK conditions face the same challenges everyone else does when being active. In addition, pain and joint stiffness make it even more difficult. People may need more support, encouragement and reassurance to be able to become more active. They do not necessarily need a specific MSK activity. Many gyms and classes welcome people who may find it difficult to take part.

## Programmes designed for people with MSK conditions

People may also benefit from accessing activity programmes specifically for people with MSK conditions such as:

- ESCAPE-pain – a group rehabilitation programme for people with chronic joint pain that integrates educational self-management and coping strategies with an exercise regimen individualised for each participant. <https://escape-pain.org/>
- Good Boost – uses digital technology to deliver affordable and accessible therapeutic exercise programmes on land, in community venues or through their home app, or in water in swimming pools. <https://www.goodboost.ai/>

## Patient organisations also have resources about exercise:

- Arthritis Action has [exercise videos](#) for people with arthritis.
- National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society has [information about exercise](#) for people with AS including how to choose an exercise class.
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society has a series of [exercise videos](#) for people with rheumatoid arthritis.
- Versus Arthritis [Let's Move with Leon](#) is an on line 12 week programme of 30-minute movement sessions, for people with MSK conditions.

## Talking to people about being more active

Moving Medicine provides clinicians and allied health professionals with accessible, evidence based, condition specific information to help give advice on physical activity at all stages of children, young peoples, and adults treatment pathways. The MSK related conditions included are MSK pain, inflammatory conditions, falls and frailty, and primary prevention. They also have an online course, Active Conversations, that teaches you how to have quick, effective and positive conversations that encourage people to do more physical activity. <https://movingmedicine.ac.uk/>

## Diet

People with arthritis often wonder what types of food they should eat or avoid to help reduce their symptoms. The aim should be to eat a well-balanced diet and to keep to a healthy weight. The British Dietetic Association (BDA) information about healthy eating provides useful general advice about how to achieve this: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/healthy-eating.html>

In research carried out by Arthritis Action and the University of Kent, published in the Journal of Nutrition, Health and Aging in 2017, there is some evidence that the Mediterranean diet may be helpful. This is generally a good, healthy diet to follow and there are some supplements which have been found to help, such as fish oils, selenium, vitamin E, Glucosamine sulphate and chondroitin.

A well balanced diet with plenty of calcium and adequate Vitamin D are vital to bone health. People with osteoporosis may need to take additional supplements. It is essential that people of all ages get enough of both these nutrients. Most people get enough Vitamin D from sunlight exposure during the summer months although Public Health England advise people to top up from the end of September to the beginning of April through food or supplements. Some people should consider taking supplements all year round – those who don't go outside enough, for example people who are housebound or live in a care home, anyone who wears clothes which cover the whole of the body and/or the face, and people with dark skin. These groups are less likely to gain enough Vitamin D from the sun, even in summer. It is easy to get calcium through food such as milk, cheese and yoghurt. People who don't eat dairy products need to seek alternatives or consider calcium supplements.

## Healthy weight

Being overweight can make MSK worse. If you are heavier then you put more force through your joints when you stand or walk, so increasing pain. Being overweight is also a risk factor in conditions such as back pain and many types of arthritis. Being underweight also poses risks, particularly of osteoporosis.

Training is available to become a healthy weight coach on the Personalised Care Institute eLearning hub. Arthritis Action offers members 1:1 nutritional and weight management consultations with a dietitian with expertise in arthritis.

## Daily activities

MSK conditions can make everyday activities such as cooking, cleaning, dressing and hobbies more difficult. There are lots of ways to make things easier from gadgets, technology and simple hacks like putting rubber bands round pencils to make them easier to grip. You can help by encouraging people to look for solutions rather than give up activities which are important to them. Support and ideas from others in the same position are probably most useful through on-line forums and local support groups. Patient organisations have a wealth of ideas on their websites.

These are some of the organisations which provide products people may find useful.

<https://www.theablelabel.com/>

<https://www.arthr.com/our-products>

<https://springchicken.co.uk/>





## Part 3:

# Mental health

There is a two-way relationship between mental health and MSK conditions. Anxiety and depression can make pain feel worse, and the pain and restriction of having an MSK condition can cause anxiety and depression. Treating emotional and mental health conditions should be a fundamental part of managing MSK conditions from point of diagnosis. However, a recent survey found that two in five people with arthritis had never been asked by a healthcare professional about their emotional wellbeing. You may be the first professional to ask your client how their condition makes them feel.

People with MSK conditions go through a series of transitions which may include one or more mis-diagnoses, reducing or giving up work, changing medication, surgery, learning to use adaptations or even moving to a more accessible house. Mental health support is needed at every transition point in a person's journey.

### Peer support

People with MSK conditions often feel alone, especially if family and friends do not understand what they are going through. Contact with patient support organisations, either through helplines or support groups, can help people understand their experiences are common. Peer support can be one of the most valuable things for people with long term MSK conditions. Be aware of the range of MSK patient organisations with national and local support (see list on page 12). Check which ones have support groups local to you. Many also provide on line support which can be accessed regardless of locality.

### IAPT

IAPT may be useful to some people with MSK conditions. The IAPT pain pathway will be even more valuable, but this is not provided in every area. Check whether your IAPT service provides this. If not, consider asking for this to be commissioned.





# Part 4: Work and education

Many people with MSK conditions are in work or would like to work. Good work is beneficial to MSK health so discussing work with people is important. People who leave work due to an MSK condition find it hard to get back into employment, so engaging with employers to keep people in work is important.

People find ways to work around their MSK problem in their daily life, but they are not always given that opportunity in the workplace. The support an employer can offer employees with MSK conditions to enable them to stay in work depends on the nature of their problem and what is feasible for the business. However, support is not always onerous; small changes can be effective in enabling people to work despite their condition. Examples include finding adaptive ways to complete a task, shortening the time spent on a task, rotating their tasks with colleagues, and having short breaks. Support is also available in some cases through the [Access to Work](#) scheme, for instance to fund equipment.

Having a conversation with an employer about a long term MSK condition can be difficult. Some people have found it useful to signpost their employer to the Business in the Community [Employers Toolkit](#) on musculoskeletal health in the workplace so that their employer has some understanding of the issues before having the conversation.

Some people with MSK conditions may be entitled to disability benefits or have employment rights under the Equality Act 2010, such as the right to reasonable adjustments. This will include some people who would not consider themselves to be disabled and may not think they would have such entitlements.

Arthritis Acton have produced an informative [webpage](#) as well as a [short video](#) about work and arthritis aimed at patients as part of their online self-management resource.

Versus Arthritis have [advice on work](#) on their website.

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/living-with-arthritis/work/>

National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society have [resources on work](#) and rheumatoid arthritis.

Royal Osteoporosis Society has a [factsheet](#) on employment.

National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society has a [guide](#) to working with AS.

Several organisations provide advice on education for children with MSK conditions:

- CCAA – Kids with Arthritis provide [links](#) to a range of useful resources and organisations
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society provides [information](#) and [booklets](#) on JIA explained, Medicines in JIA and Managing JIA in school
- Versus Arthritis provide a range of [advice for teachers](#) and advice for [young people](#) living with arthritis including advice about school and university
- Royal Osteoporosis Society has a [factsheet](#) on osteoporosis and fractures in children
- Ehlers-Danlos Support UK and Hypermobility Syndromes Association (HMSA) have a [toolkit for schools](#)



## Part 5: Your local area

There are all kinds of community assets which can help people with MSK conditions to manage their conditions better. Being more active, improving mental health through connecting with others and peer support are three major contributions. As a Link Worker you will know what is available in your area. These don't need to be specific for people with MSK conditions. General walking groups, yoga, tai chi, swimming pools, gyms, anything where people will feel welcome even if they have some restrictions on what they can do. As with any long-term condition, engaging in any group activity will help with mental health. You can signpost physical activity providers to the [ARMA videos](#) on supporting customers with MSK conditions.

Any group activity related to crafts, hobbies, leisure, food and healthy eating can also help. Anything which helps people to be active, engage with others and enjoy life will be beneficial and support them to manage their condition.

There is also value in meeting people in the same position or with the same condition. Many of the ARMA member organisations have local support groups. Check what is available in your area. Many also now have on-line offers and virtual communities, so if there is nothing relevant locally, these can also be helpful.







## Improve Daily Life With Arthritis.

Arthritis Action is the UK charity offering an integrated self-management approach, which helps address the physical and mental health symptoms of living with arthritis. Our Charity's vision is for all people to live active and healthy lives, free from the impact of arthritis.

### What we offer:

- Information and advice on how to self-manage painful arthritis symptoms, including healthy eating, weight management, exercise, pain management, and mental wellbeing.
- Self-management events and peer-support groups across the country.
- Electronic newsletters and online resources on self-management, physical activity, nutrition, and mental wellbeing.
- A personalised service, helping people to set individual goals and receive personalised support to achieve them.

### For more information:



0203 781 7120



[info@arthritisaaction.org.uk](mailto:info@arthritisaaction.org.uk)



[www.arthritisaaction.org.uk](http://www.arthritisaaction.org.uk)



# MSK patient support group

**Arthritis Action** – self-management and wellbeing resources, weight management and exercise support, peer-support groups. <https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/>

**Ehlers-Danlos Support UK** – helpline, support groups and online information resources <http://www.ehlers-danlos.org/>

**Fibromyalgia Action UK** – helpline and support groups <http://www.fmauk.org/>

**Hypermobility Syndrome Association** – helpline and support groups <https://www.hypermobility.org/>

**National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society** have local support groups and a national helpline. <http://www.nass.co.uk//>

**National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society** have a helpline, local and virtual NRAS groups, free resources and a supported self-management programme. <https://www.nras.org.uk/>

**Polymyalgia Rheumatica & Giant Cell Arteritis UK** – local groups, helpline <http://www.pmrgcauk.com/>

**Psoriasis Association (including psoriatic arthritis)** – (including psoriatic arthritis) – helpline and online forums. <https://www.psoriasis-association.org.uk/>

**Royal Osteoporosis Society** – support groups and a helpline <https://theros.org.uk/>

**Scleroderma and Raynaud's UK** – helpline, support groups and online information resources. <http://www.sruk.co.uk/>

**UK Gout Society** – on line information <http://www.ukgoutsociety.org/>

**Versus Arthritis** – helpline, on line chat bot (available to answer common questions 24/7) and local groups and services. <https://www.versusarthritis.org/>

## Children

CCAA (Kids with Arthritis) supports children, young people and their families. <https://www.ccaa.org.uk/>

JIA@NRAS provides a comprehensive website, free resources and peer support – [www.jia.org.uk](http://www.jia.org.uk)

Versus Arthritis (see above) also have support for children and young people.

# Actions you can take



Think about MSK health when you meet clients.

Ask how a person's MSK condition makes them feel.



Talk to all clients about physical activity, weight and healthy eating habits.

Find out what's available in local community venues.



Find out which patient organisations have groups in your area.

Find out if the IAPT pain pathway is available in your area.



Talk to clients about how their MSK condition affects their work.

Be a champion for MSK – talk about the impact of MSK and what can be done about it.



Make contact with your local MSK service. Find out what they have to offer and see if they would be interested in you speaking to their team about what you can offer their patients.

# Life Without Limits for those living with RA or JIA



**The National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society is the only UK patient led charity with a specific focus on rheumatoid arthritis and in more recent years juvenile idiopathic arthritis.**

Due to our targeted focus on RA and JIA, NRAS provides truly expert and wide-ranging services to support, educate and campaign for people living with these complex auto-immune conditions, their families and the health professionals who treat them. NRAS strives for this by enabling the RA & JIA community to thrive by providing access to:

- Support
- Expert knowledge
- Engagement
- Campaigning
- Research

Supported self-management is central to all our services.

## NRAS offers:

- Freephone helpline with highly trained staff to answer queries on all aspects of living with RA or JIA
- Free resources on all aspects of living with RA including being newly diagnosed, understanding treatments, managing fatigue, employment and working with RA, emotional and wellbeing support, intimacy and family planning etc.
- Here4U trained telephone support volunteers with lived experience to offer peer support
- Free JIA resources including JIA explained, Managing JIA in Schools and JIA Medicines booklets in addition to educational video resources
- 6 Week Online Wellbeing courses- Exercise; Nutrition; Mindfulness, Yoga etc.
- Self-Management Individualise Learning Environment – SMILE-RA- [Supported self-management | NRAS](#)

- New2RA Right Start and Living with RA – health professional patient referral service to access tailored resources and support for RA patients [Refer a patient | NRAS](#)



- Coming soon New2JIA Right Start for families with children newly diagnosed with JIA
- Virtual topic specific peer groups including – Working with RA; Exercise & Support with RA; Parenting with RA; JIA parents group
- Monthly Facebook live broadcasts with special guests on a variety of topics
- Interactive RheumZOOMs with speakers from across the world of rheumatology



## For more information:

- ☎ Helpline: 0800 298 7650  
General: 01628 823 524
- ✉ [enquiries@nras.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nras.org.uk) & [elpline@nras.org.uk](mailto:elpline@nras.org.uk)
- 🌐 [www.nras.org.uk](http://www.nras.org.uk) & [www.jia.org.uk](http://www.jia.org.uk)



**The Ehlers-Danlos Support UK (EDS UK) works across the UK providing information and support to people affected by any type of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS) or hypermobility spectrum disorder (HSD) and to those caring for them.**



**What we offer:**

- Free telephone and email helpline including weekly Facebook Lives: tel. 0800 907 8518; [helpline@ehlers-danlos.org](mailto:helpline@ehlers-danlos.org)
- An active network of peer support across the UK with both virtual and face to face meetings accessed via free membership: [ehlers-danlos.org](http://ehlers-danlos.org)
- Information and webinars about all types of EDS and HSD, including symptoms, diagnosis, management and living with the conditions
- Electronic newsletters
- A bi-annual magazine (choose between digital or print)
- Opportunities to participate in research
- An online toolkit for GPs: [gptoolkit.ehlers-danlos.org](http://gptoolkit.ehlers-danlos.org)
- An online toolkit for school staff: [theschooltoolkit.org](http://theschooltoolkit.org)

**For more information:**

- ☎ 0208 736 5604
- ✉ [info@ehlers-danlos.org](mailto:info@ehlers-danlos.org)
- 🌐 [www.ehlers-danlos.org](http://www.ehlers-danlos.org)
- 👍 @ehlersdanlosuk



