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9

# A public health approach to musculoskeletal health



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### A B S T R A C T

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An ageing, physically inactive and increasingly obese population, coupled with finite health and social care resources, requires a shift from treating musculoskeletal disease when it arises to a preventive approach promoting lifelong musculoskeletal health. A public health approach to musculoskeletal health ensures that people are able to live not only long, but also well. Supporting self-management, addressing common misconceptions about the inevitability of musculoskeletal conditions, and offering brief interventions to support necessary lifestyle changes are basic public health functions that all health professionals can deliver. More specialist public health skills including needs assessment, data interpretation and service planning are also needed to deliver high quality services. These will require improvements in the data collected about musculoskeletal health nationally. A public health approach would benefit individuals through reduced pain and improved function due to musculoskeletal conditions, and wider society by minimising lost economic productivity and lowering health and social care costs.

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## Introduction

In 2013 Arthritis Research UK convened a round table discussion to explore the opportunities in using a public health approach to improve population musculoskeletal health. The impetus for this meeting was the reorganisation of the public health system in England. This included the creation of Public Health England, which had begun a review of national strategic priorities for public health.

The meeting included senior academic researchers; representatives from public health organisations – Public Health England, the Faculty of Public Health, the Royal Society of Public Health; patient organisations – Age UK, the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance, Arthritis Care, the National Osteoporosis Society; and health professional organisations – the British Orthopaedic Association, the British Society for Rheumatology, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, the Primary Care Rheumatology Society, and the Royal College of General Practitioners. In the months following this meeting, Arthritis Research UK produced a publication, *Musculoskeletal health – a public health approach* [1].

This article is based on that report and has three sections. The first section reviews the concepts of musculoskeletal health, musculoskeletal conditions and the role for public health in addressing these. Section two considers why a public health approach to musculoskeletal conditions is desirable and achievable. The final section outlines the major components required to achieve such an approach.

## Section 1: Musculoskeletal health, musculoskeletal conditions, and public health

### *Musculoskeletal health*

Musculoskeletal health means more than the absence of a musculoskeletal condition. Good musculoskeletal health means that the muscles, joints and bones work well together without pain and requires multiple factors to come together to achieve this (Fig. 1). People with good musculoskeletal health can carry out the activities they want to with ease and without discomfort. It is possible to have poor musculoskeletal health without having a specific musculoskeletal condition.

### *Musculoskeletal conditions*

Broadly, three groups of musculoskeletal conditions can affect people leading to poor musculoskeletal health [2]. The commonest group comprises conditions of musculoskeletal pain such as



Fig. 1. Factors comprising musculoskeletal health [1].

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