

## Review Article

# The impact of arthritis on the early employment experiences of young adults: A literature review

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Young adulthood is an important transitional life phase that can determine a person's career trajectory. To date, little research has examined the influence of arthritis on early work experiences.

**Objectives:** This literature review aims at examining the impact of arthritis on the early career phase of young adults and identifying the barriers to employment.

**Methods:** Two independent reviewers searched bibliographic databases for arthritis conditions and a series of employment-related keywords and subject headings. Information on authors, publication year; study design, sample characteristics (e.g., number of participants, age, gender, arthritis type); work outcomes measured; and specific barriers to employment was recorded.

**Results:** Nine studies were uncovered in the review. All studies examined young people with juvenile arthritis (9 of 9 studies) and consisted of sample sizes with less than 150 participants (6 of 9 studies) who were primarily recruited from clinics (7 of 9 studies). All were cross-sectional designs. Employment status was primarily examined and ranged from 11% to 71%. Although not always statistically significant, young adults with arthritis were less likely to be employed when compared to their healthy peers. Greater disease severity, less educational attainment and being female were related to not participating in paid work.

**Conclusion:** This review brings to light the paucity of studies examining the early employment experiences of young adults with arthritis. There is a need to expand research to contribute to recommendations for sustained and productive employment across the working life course. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Young adulthood; Employment; Arthritis

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Arthritis is a leading cause of work disability in industrialized countries.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the impact of the disease on young adults at the early phase of the working life course is not completely understood. Arthritis is used to describe a group of more than 100 rheumatic diseases that cause inflammation and loss of function to one or more connecting or supporting structures of the body and can cause pain, fatigue and swelling.<sup>1,2</sup> To date, a majority of employment studies have focused on general adult samples (ages 18–65 years) living with arthritis and show that they are less likely to work when compared to their healthy counterparts.<sup>3–6</sup> Additionally, employed adults with arthritis are more likely

to be underemployed which includes not working as often as one would like, an inability to utilize training and skills in one's job or a reduced likelihood of a promotion.<sup>7</sup> Studies also show that people with arthritis report productivity loss in the form of absenteeism (e.g. missed work days) or presenteeism (e.g. at-work productivity loss, job disruptions).<sup>8–11</sup> The impact of unemployment, underemployment and productivity loss resulting from arthritis is significant. In countries like Canada or the United States, two-thirds of arthritis-related costs are indirect including lost wages, reduced tax revenue and costs of long- and short-term disability.<sup>1,7,8</sup> Despite the abundance of research, little is known about how arthritis affects early career experiences of young adults.

Young adulthood is a distinct transitional life phase that typically spans 18–30 years of age.<sup>12</sup> During this period individuals shift from the dependency of childhood to greater independence in a range of adult social roles like marriage, parenting or employment.<sup>12,13</sup> Obtaining a full-time job is considered a hallmark of a successful transition to adulthood and provides opportunities for the generation

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of income, contributes to a person's self-identity, fosters the acquisition of new skills and creates arenas for socialization.<sup>14</sup> Involvement in paid work allows young people to independently access housing, education, nutritious foods, and other social services that benefit health.<sup>15</sup> Failure in early work experiences has potential future adverse consequences such as risk of unemployment, reduced long-term earnings, and deterioration of skills.<sup>14,16,17</sup> Young adults also experience higher rates of unemployment, are more sensitive to economic changes, take longer to find work, report greater job strain and are more likely to indicate idleness (e.g. neither in education nor employment).<sup>14,18–20</sup> While having arthritis in young adulthood can compound these vulnerabilities, differences in employment between healthy young adults and those with arthritis are not completely understood.

The aim of this review was to determine the impact of arthritis on the early work experiences of young adults and identify the barriers to employment at the beginning phase of one's career. The review also aims to determine whether differences exist between young adults with arthritis and their healthy peers. This study will uncover gaps in research and understand specific problems and needs that could be addressed in future interventions to help young adults with arthritis gain employment and remain employed throughout their adult life.

## Methods

A review of literature on employment, young adulthood and arthritis was conducted.

### Study inclusion

To be included in the review, articles had to have been published between 1990 and 2013; examine employment participation, work disability or work productivity as primary study outcomes; and include participants with a mean age between 18 and 30 years who were diagnosed with arthritis. Articles were restricted to English language as translation resources were not available. An initial search found that few studies examined samples with mean ages between 18 and 30 years. Accordingly, the search was expanded to include studies with a sample mean age between 16 and 40 years.

### Search strategy and data extraction

MEDLINE, EMBASE, Pubmed and PsycInfo were searched for references published between 1990 and December 2013 by the author (AJ) and a research associate. In each database, arthritis conditions were selected based on their subject headings (SH) and then combined with a series of employment-related keywords and SHs. Arthritis conditions including juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, juvenile idiopathic arthritis, juvenile chronic arthritis, ankylosing

spondylitis, systemic lupus erythematosus, scleroderma, dermatomyositis, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis were searched. Employment and work were entered as the primary SH and keyword. Subsequently, other terms used to characterize employment were searched including absenteeism, presenteeism, employment status, occupational health, sick leave, work disability and vocational rehabilitation (full search strategy available upon request).<sup>21</sup> Data extracted from each study included authors, year, study design, sample characteristics (e.g., number of participants, age, gender, arthritis type), work outcomes measured, and barriers to employment (Table 1). Searches and data extraction were conducted independently by AJ and the research associate and disagreements regarding study inclusion or information extracted were settled by discussion.

## Results

The initial literature search resulted in 1018 references. Examination of the titles and abstracts revealed 25 papers actually examined young samples living with arthritis. Of these, 14 were excluded because they did not collect original data or employment was examined as an independent variable that was not the focus of research and two studies were excluded because they were published prior to 1990<sup>22,23</sup> (Fig. 1). The remaining nine papers are summarized on Table 1. All examined the impact of juvenile arthritis on employment.<sup>24–32</sup> No studies examined other forms of arthritis. An examination of study characteristics showed that sample sizes ranged from  $n = 43$  to 421. 6 of 9 studies had samples with less than 150 participants and most studies (7 of 9) uncovered by the review consisted of samples recruited from a clinical database. All were cross-sectional designs.

Employment status (employed yes or no) was the main outcome variable utilized in articles and ranged from 18% to 71%. Several studies also compared employment status to age-matched controls<sup>20,24,27,28,32</sup> or age-matched population-level data.<sup>26,29</sup> In all cases, young adults were less likely to be employed when compared to their healthy peers. However, differences were not always statistically significant. Several studies utilized work outcome measures other than employment status. Malviya et al (2012), used the Workplace Instability Scale, a measure of the mismatch between an individual's functional ability and their job demands, to examine at-work job difficulties.<sup>28</sup> Findings showed that high Work Instability Scores were related to greater activity limitations and lower educational outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Gerhardt et al (2008), examined career aspirations in a study of young people with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). Results showed that participants with JIA were less likely than their healthy peers to report that their current jobs were related to their future goals.<sup>27</sup>

When examining barriers to employment, a majority of studies (8 out of 9) showed that greater disease severity

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