

# VERSUS ARTHRITIS

## Versus Arthritis' response to the Health Foundation's COVID-19 Impact Inquiry

December 2020

---

1. Versus Arthritis welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Health Foundation's 'COVID-19 impact inquiry'.<sup>1</sup>
2. Versus Arthritis is the charity formed by Arthritis Research UK and Arthritis Care joining together. We work alongside volunteers, healthcare professionals, researchers, and friends to do everything we can to push back against arthritis. Together, we develop breakthrough treatments, campaign for arthritis to be a priority and provide support. Our remit covers all musculoskeletal conditions which affect the joints, bones and muscles including osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, back pain, and osteoporosis.<sup>2</sup>
3. Arthritis and related musculoskeletal conditions affect 18.8 million people in the UK and are the single biggest cause of pain and disability in the UK. Cumulatively, the healthcare costs of osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis will reach £118.6 billion over the next decade.<sup>3</sup> Musculoskeletal conditions account for a fifth of all sickness absence and result in the loss of around 28.2 million working days to the UK economy each year.<sup>4</sup>
4. This submission provides an overview of the key findings from survey research we have conducted during the pandemic in order to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on people with musculoskeletal conditions and on the musculoskeletal health of the wider population in a number of areas:
  - The overall impact of the pandemic on the physical health and level of pain experienced by people with musculoskeletal conditions, as well as their ability to manage their condition
  - The interruption of routine care for musculoskeletal conditions
  - Cancellation of joint replacement surgeries and increased waiting times
  - The impact of restrictions on the physical activity levels
  - The overall impact of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions on mental health and wellbeing
  - The impact of COVID-19 on employment for people with new and existing musculoskeletal conditions
  - Shielding among people with musculoskeletal conditions throughout the pandemic
  - The effectiveness of general government guidance and public health messaging.

## Research overview

In order to fully capture and understand the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic on individuals with musculoskeletal problems, Versus Arthritis has conducted survey research on a variety of difference topics relating to people's experiences during COVID-19.

This table provides an overview of the surveys conducted by Versus Arthritis in response to COVID-19, including the scope, when the survey ran, and the number of respondents:

<b>Survey no.</b>	<b>Survey title and scope</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Sample population</b>	<b>Date</b>
1	COVID-19 Pain Impact Survey – Focused on the impact of COVID-19 on pain levels and management	6180	Survey was conducted online and promoted through our campaigns network, marketing campaign, and shared by our stakeholders (UK-wide)	Ran between April – 30 June 2020
2	COVID-19 & Shielding Survey – Focused on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions and shielding on people's everyday experiences of live and the management of musculoskeletal condition	Core sample -1003 Comparison group - 250	Research was conducted in partnership with Revealing Realities and data was collected from an online panel of survey respondents. Core sample was broadly representative of adults with musculoskeletal conditions. The comparison group was made up of people with other long-term health conditions, but not musculoskeletal conditions. (UK-wide)	Ran between 02 - 08 July 2020
3	Back Pain in Lockdown Survey – Focused on the prevalence of new musculoskeletal pain among people who have been home workers during COVID-19	1,040	Research was conducted by Opinium Research who sampled UK workers who have started to work from home during the COVID-19 and did not have any pre-existing musculoskeletal problems before the pandemic. (UK-wide)	Ran between 25 August - 01 September
4	Joint Replacement COVID-19 Impact Survey – Focused on those people who are waiting for joint replacement surgery during COVID-19 and the impact waiting has had on their health	688	Survey was conducted online and circulate to members of our campaigns network, including 800 people who had a musculoskeletal condition and who Versus Arthritis had previously been in contact about their experience waiting for joint replacement surgery (Data is currently limited to England only responses but UK-wide data should be available by early 2021)	Ran between 22 October-20 November
5	November Winter Lockdown Survey – Focused on people's concerns about the future impact of COVID-19 on their health and wellbeing in the context of a second wave and the reintroduction of tighter restrictions	1499	Survey was conducted online and circulated to members of our campaigns network	Ran between 17 - 23 November

The findings from these surveys are outlined in the following section, grouped according to the area of focus. The source survey for each set of statistics is stated, along with information on additional research conducted by other organisations that is relevant to, or aligns with, our results.

In addition to these surveys, Versus Arthritis has also gathered the experiences of people with musculoskeletal conditions throughout the pandemic through a series of first-person interviews, and by inviting people to 'share their story' online and through our campaigner email network. We can share this insight, with relevant permissions, with the Health Foundation if those insights would be valuable to the work of the inquiry.

### **Research results – By topic area**

#### **The overall impact of the pandemic on the physical health and level of pain experienced by people with musculoskeletal conditions, as well as their ability to manage their condition**

##### *Key findings*

Our research suggests that a majority of individuals with musculoskeletal conditions have experienced a deterioration in their physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in greater levels of daily pain and more functional limitations. As result, a significant number of people reported finding it a lot harder to manage their condition, and carry out the tasks involved in their daily routine.

##### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found that:
  - 1 in 3 (32%) respondents said managing their condition during COVID-19 had been harder than before the pandemic
  - A fifth of individuals reported expecting a lot of challenges in managing their condition because of COVID-19
  - 45% of respondents reported that their mobility had become worse
  - 45% reported that their pain had become worse
  - 34% said they found doing the daily tasks harder
  - More positively, 54% of respondents agreed that they had been able to make time to manage their physical wellbeing during COVID-19.
- Our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey found:
  - 51% of people did not feel that they could manage their pain and do the things around the home
  - 81% wanted more information and guidance on how to manage their pain
  - 93% felt the government needed to do more to raise awareness of the pain experience by people with musculoskeletal conditions.
- Our November Winter Lockdown Impact survey indicated that:
  - 74% of individuals were worried about the long-term impact of COVID-19 and the second wave of national restrictions on their physical health and ability to manage their pain.
- Additionally, analysis of queries across all our channels, including our helpline, social media, e-mail and other public-facing interfaces showed that in the weeks following the implementation of the national lockdown measures in late March, there was a

200% increase in pain-related queries over the previous three-month average (December–February).

### **The interruption of routine care for individuals with musculoskeletal conditions**

#### *Key findings*

Our survey research showed that people with musculoskeletal have experienced widespread disruption in their routine care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many forms of healthcare were affected, either through postponement, cancellation, or being moved to virtual delivery. While the full, long-term impact of these changes is not currently understood, it's likely that reduced access to care has, in part, driven the deterioration in musculoskeletal health reported by many people with musculoskeletal conditions, which for some will be irreversible.

#### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found that:
  - 60% of physiotherapy or podiatry appointments had been cancelled and a further 28% had been rescheduled or moved to online/telephone only
  - 72% of treatment sessions to manage pain or improve mobility had been cancelled, with all other appointments being delayed or moved online
  - 75% of exercise classes had been cancelled and an additional 12% had been rescheduled or were now being run virtually
  - 43% of services for supporting mental health and wellbeing were cancelled, with 33% being moved online and 9% being rescheduled
  - Hospital appointments for blood work were the least disrupted type of appointment, with 40% continuing as normal, and 15% being rescheduled
  - The highest level of digital delivery was in GP appointments, 66% had been moved online and only 23% being cancelled or rescheduled
  - Of those who received virtual appointments during COVID-19, 44% of respondents said they were worse than the previous face-to face care they received
  - Only 11% of respondents had found it easier to get routine appointments at GPs or hospitals as a result of reduced demand.
- These results align with the response to our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey, in which:
  - 42% reported having an appointment cancelled because of COVID-19
  - 40% indicated that they did not have access to the care and treatment that they needed to effectively manage their pain
  - 84% of respondents agreed that being able to access treatments that were right for them when needed would help them better manage their pain.
- The findings of the November Winter Lockdown Impact survey found that the impact of cancelled care is an ongoing concern for people with musculoskeletal conditions, as 66% of respondents reporting that they were concerned about accessing routine care during the second national lockdown.

## **Cancellation of joint replacement surgeries and increasing waiting times for people with musculoskeletal conditions.**

### *Key findings*

The cancellation and subsequent slow restarting of all elective surgery due to the pandemic has had a profound impact on those individuals with musculoskeletal conditions who were waiting for joint replacement surgery before the pandemic, or who now require a replacement due to a worsening of their condition. Extended waiting times and ongoing uncertainty have a serious negative impact on the physical health and mental wellbeing of people waiting for joint replacement surgery. Furthermore, poor communication and support for patients on waiting lists has led to many feeling abandoned or forgotten by the system.

### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions indicated that:
  - 59% of operations including joint replacement surgeries had been completely cancelled, with only 18% still going ahead as originally planned
  - 53% of respondents said that operations would be their leading priority when looking to re-book treatment and care once appointments were available again.
- The findings of Joint Replacement COVID-19 Impact survey found that in England:
  - 34% of respondents had been waiting for between 6 months and a year for joint replacement surgery, 29% had been waiting for between 1 to 2 years and 11% had been waiting for over 2 years for surgery
  - 57% had not been offered any options for proceeding with their surgery during the pandemic
  - 84% had not been offered an alternative choice of provider for their surgery despite their extended wait time
  - 55% of respondents had either had their surgery or a related appointment cancelled or postponed by their hospital due to COVID-19
  - For those who had chosen to cancel or postpone treatment themselves:
    - 52% cited a fear about getting COVID-19 in hospital as the reason behind that decision
    - 46% said it was because they were shielding
  - 72% of respondents had not been given a likely surgery date or an estimated waiting time for receiving treatment
  - Only 14% had been offered access to a physiotherapist while waiting for surgery
  - During their wait for surgery:
    - 79% reported their general physical health had worsened
    - 89% said their pain levels had gotten worse
    - 90% reported reduced mobility
    - 79% said they were less independent
    - 72% reported a deterioration in their mental health.
- Research from professional organisations also supports patient concerns about facing an extended wait for joint replacement, as the restart of elective care has been significantly slower than planned. Findings from a survey conducted by the British

Orthopaedic Association (BOA) and the British Orthopaedic Directors Society (BODS) conducted in August across England and Wales showed that 75% of Orthopaedic Clinical Directors said that the 2020 targets for activity levels were unlikely to be achieved. Modelling suggests that the NHS would have to achieve between 143-168% of pre-COVID practice over the next 12-18 months to manage the additional caseload.<sup>5</sup>

- This is also supported by NHS England data, which shows that by the end of August this year, trauma and orthopaedic services had the second highest number of people waiting to receive care. 56% of people on the waiting list were waiting longer than 18 weeks, which is three times more than number during the same period last year.<sup>6</sup>

### **The impact of restrictions on the physical activity levels for people with musculoskeletal conditions**

#### *Key findings*

Staying physically active is vital to maintaining musculoskeletal health, and exercise can also help individuals with existing musculoskeletal conditions to manage their pain and prevent further disability. A range of factors including; the closure of leisure centres, suspension of exercise groups, shielding restrictions, not feeling comfortable using outdoor exercise spaces because of concerns around acquiring COVID-19, and not having appropriate space or resources to exercise at home, have all acted as barriers to people's ability to stay physically active, and in turn have made it harder to maintain their musculoskeletal health.

#### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey found that:
  - Under half (49%) of respondents said that they were able to be physically active during the first months of the pandemic
  - 70% wanted more opportunities in their local area to take regular exercise and stay active in order to manage their pain.
- In our November Winter Lockdown Impact survey:
  - 31% of respondents were concerned about not being able to access leisure facilities
  - 69% said they were worried about the impact of restrictions on their mobility and ability to stay physically active.
- The importance of physical activity to people with musculoskeletal conditions was also captured in our COVID-19 & Shielding survey results. Among people with musculoskeletal conditions:
  - 47% of respondents said they were doing far less physical activity as a result of the national lockdown
  - 38% said they had to regularly leave their home during lockdown in order to be more physical active
  - The need for greater physical exercise was a key factor in people deciding to stop shielding earlier than instructed, with 32% saying it was the leading reason.
- Similar issues have been highlighted in other research focused on people with other long-term conditions. Survey work carried out by the Richmond Group of Charities, in partnership with Sport England, found that during the height of lockdown restrictions, 4 in 10 people with long-term health conditions reported doing less physical activity

than normal, and even as lockdown restrictions eased in mid-May, 55% of people with long-term health conditions said that they still worried about leaving their home to do exercise.<sup>7</sup>

- Our Back Pain in Lockdown survey showed that home workers who did not have musculoskeletal problems pre-COVID had also seen a reduction in physical activity, which in turn increases their risk of musculoskeletal issues developing:
  - 48% said they had been less physically active during the pandemic than before
  - 55% agreed that they were less physically active when working from home than they had been in their normal workplace.

### **The overall impact of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions on the mental health and wellbeing of people with musculoskeletal conditions**

#### *Key findings*

Increased levels of concern, stress, loneliness, and isolation have been a consistent feature of the experiences reported by people with musculoskeletal conditions. This is especially true for the most vulnerable groups within our population, who have been living with drastically reduced levels of social interaction throughout the pandemic. Individuals living with musculoskeletal pain are already at a higher risk of developing mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, and therefore the mental health impacts of the pandemic are likely to be part of the long-term fallout of the consequences of COVID-19.

#### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found that 53% of respondents reported difficulties with their mental health due to the pandemic, including:
  - 38% saying their mental health and wellbeing had become worse
  - 39% reporting feeling less connected to things that were important to friends, family, and their community more broadly
  - Among those were shielding but decided to stop early, 25% reported that it was due to a need for more social interaction.
- In our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey:
  - 40% reported feeling lonelier since the pandemic, a figure that rose to 46% among those who were shielding
  - 65% of people said that having the opportunity to connect with other people with musculoskeletal conditions for support would help with their pain management.
- The results of our November Winter Lockdown Impact survey indicated:
  - 58% of respondents said they were more worried about COVID-19 at that point November than they were at the beginning of the pandemic, only 4% said they were less worried
    - The levels of concern were higher amongst people who were shielding, with 61% of shielding respondents reporting higher levels of concern compared to when the pandemic began
  - 68% of all respondents said that not being able to see friends or family was a leading concern for them during the second national lockdown
  - 58% reported being worried about their mental health during this period of restrictions, and 14% said they were concerned about increased isolation.

## **The impact of COVID-19 on employment for people with new and existing musculoskeletal conditions**

### *Key findings*

The impact of COVID-19 on employment has been mixed for people with musculoskeletal conditions. Our research indicates that many people with musculoskeletal conditions who have been able to work from home have broadly benefited from the move to flexible working and working from home, which has allowed them to build their working patterns around their fluctuating symptoms and healthcare needs. However, our findings also show that more needs to be done to support people with musculoskeletal conditions to work productively and safely, both from home and in COVID-19 secure environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has also created new and unexpected challenges for the general public in maintaining their musculoskeletal health, as our research suggests that the pandemic has led to an increase in the development of new musculoskeletal pain in people. This aligns with analysis conducted by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which estimates that the burden of musculoskeletal conditions is likely to increase in response to COVID-19, principally due to the guidance to work from home wherever possible often without ergonomic office equipment.<sup>8</sup>

### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey found that of those people with musculoskeletal conditions who had started working from home:
  - 60% felt it benefitted their physical health
  - 53% enjoyed the flexibility working from home afforded them
  - 47% wanted working from home to be a long-term option for them post-restrictions
  - 37% said it benefitted their mental health
  - But notably, only 53% of respondents confirmed that they had their equipment needs met and 40% reported that they had not been able to make changes or access support to be in work during the pandemic
  - 46% said that practical adjustments and more support at work would help them manage their pain.
- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found that:
  - Among the roughly half of people with musculoskeletal who normally worked, 1 in 5 reported that there were temporarily or permanently out of a job, either being furloughed or no longer working
  - Only half (53%) of respondents were confident their employer will be able to provide a Covid-safe workplace, and 52% said that they were confident that they knew their employment rights regards COVID-19
  - Among the shielding population in the survey, a third of the working age population (31%) said financial pressures or pressure from their employer forced them to stop shielding in order to return to work.
- In regard to individuals who did not have musculoskeletal problems pre-COVID-19, our Back Pain in Lockdown survey highlighted that among home workers with no history of musculoskeletal pain:

- 81% of desk workers who switched to home working have since developed musculoskeletal pain
- 23% reported that it affected them either often or all the time
- 89% of those experiencing pain had not told their employers about this new pain
- One in three (35%) office workers had received no kit, support, or advice from their employer on home working.
- Our research on the development of new musculoskeletal pain is supported by interim research put out by the Institute of Employment Studies in April, which found a significant increase in musculoskeletal pain among home workers, with more than half of the survey respondents reporting new aches and pains compared to their normal physical condition.<sup>9</sup>

## **Shielding among people with musculoskeletal conditions throughout the pandemic**

### *Key findings*

Our research highlights the complex dynamics that exist around shielding for people with musculoskeletal conditions. A significant percentage of people with musculoskeletal conditions reported following shielding guidance in the first wave of the pandemic, even without receiving a formal instruction to shield. This dynamic speaks to the level of concern, anxiety, and confusion among people with long-term health conditions about how best they could keep themselves safe during both waves of the pandemic. It is also important to note that some individuals have continued shielding throughout the pandemic. For those who did shield, a range of issues were reported including struggling to access food and medicines, coping with isolation, and maintaining physical health and mobility.

### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found that:
  - 4 in 10 (43%) respondents shielded at some point in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, but only a quarter of respondents received an official shielding letter
  - Almost half of those surveyed had made an active decision to shield themselves, outside of the official advice
  - Among those who did shield during the first wave, only 21% registered for additional support from the government
    - Only 10% of people who made an active decision to shield without receiving a letter, registered with government for additional support, which suggests there are people who need extra support the Government may not be aware of
  - Shielding was a challenging experience for individuals with musculoskeletal conditions, and almost a third of those who did shield, 32%, reported that they decided to stop shielding early for a number of reasons:
    - 32% stopped due to a need for greater physical activity
    - 25% stopped due to a need for more social interaction
    - 12% stopped because they found it difficult to maintain shielding within their household
    - 25% stopped because they lacked support for getting vital supplies including food and medicines

- Only 42% of respondents who shielded as part of the first wave would be prepared to shield for another 12 weeks or longer.
- Our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey also highlighted some of the problems experienced by those who were shielding in the first months of the pandemic:
  - 33% reported that they had been advised to shield for 12 weeks in response to the pandemic
  - Of those who did shield:
    - Only 18% were confident that they could get support from local government, with 66% relying on family and friends for help while shielding
    - 51% of shielders had difficulty shopping and accessing food delivery services.
- The results of our November Winter Lockdown Impact survey indicated:
  - Similar to the data collected during the first wave of the pandemic, 37% of respondents indicated that they were shielding as part of the second national lockdown measures.
  - Within the group that were shielding:
    - Again, a significant number (42%) had not received an official instruction to shield but felt they needed to
    - 54% said they were most concerned about communication and support for the clinically extremely vulnerable
    - 40% reported being most concerned about accessing medicines, shopping, and other essentials.

## **The effectiveness of general government guidance and public health messaging**

### *Key findings*

Our research indicates that government's guidance caused widespread confusion among people with musculoskeletal conditions, especially during the initial wave of the pandemic. Variation in guidance across the devolved nations was an additional source of confusion. People with musculoskeletal conditions accessed information from a range of sources, and our research found that the source of information was a key factor in determining the level of trust people placed on it, with healthcare professionals being the most trusted providers of information.

### *Data*

- Our COVID-19 & Shielding survey among people with musculoskeletal conditions found:
  - Among those people who shielded during the first wave:
    - 46% did not think the UK government's guidance was clear
    - 55% were confused about the differences in advice between the four nations
    - 54% were not sure whether the government shielding guidance applied to them or not
    - 28% had to actively search for information about shielding in order to understand what they should do.
  - Trust in the guidance varied significantly, depending on the source:
    - 86% of people trusted the guidance given by healthcare professionals

- 82% trusted advice from local NHS health services
  - 67% trusted the guidance provided through the NHS 111 COVID-19 service
  - 48% of respondents said they trusted the UK government's advice
  - 47% trusted the advice on their local council website.
  - The data from our COVID-19 Pain Impact survey found similar issues, with 27% of respondents reporting that they found the guidance confusing
    - Over the three months of data collection for the survey, the level of confusion around the guidance steadily increased as it continued to change; 26% of respondents struggled to understand the guidance in April data, a figure which rose to 28% in May and 32% in June.
  - The confusion around government guidance and how it applied to people with musculoskeletal conditions was also made clear through our public support channels, which experienced an influx of COVID-19 related questions during the initial lockdown. The overwhelming volume of queries we received prompted Versus Arthritis to create COVA, a COVID-19 Virtual Assistant chatbot that was designed to answer people's COVID-19- specific questions throughout the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>
- 

For further information on this submission, please contact: Madeleine Webb, Policy Officer, Versus Arthritis: [m.evanswebb@versusarthritis.org](mailto:m.evanswebb@versusarthritis.org)

## References

- 1 The Health Foundation (2020). COVID-19 impact inquiry. Accessed here: <https://www.health.org.uk/what-we-do/a-healthier-uk-population/mobilising-action-for-healthy-lives/covid-19-impact-inquiry>
- 2 Versus Arthritis (2020). About Us. Accessed here: <https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-us/>
- 3 York Health Economics (2017). The Cost of Arthritis: Calculation conducted on behalf of Arthritis Research UK.
- 4 Office for National Statistics (ONS). Sickness Absence Report 2017
- 5 Mishra, Bhanu, et al. (2020). BODS/BOA Survey of impact of COVID-19 on UK orthopaedic practice and implications on restoration of elective services. Accessed here: <https://www.boa.ac.uk/resources/bods-boa-survey-of-impact-of-covid-19-on-uk-orthopaedic-practice-and-implications-on-restoration-of-elective-services.html>
- 6 NHS England (2020). Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data 2020-21. Accessed here: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-waiting-times/rtt-data-2020-21/>
- 7 We are Undefeatable (2020). Health conditions and physical activity: Impact of COVID-19 survey results. Accessed here: [https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-06/Covid-19%20insight%20pack.pdf?\\_RNuZas7gBc1ZWfiogtvwUBCU0C9ppxK](https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-06/Covid-19%20insight%20pack.pdf?_RNuZas7gBc1ZWfiogtvwUBCU0C9ppxK)
- 8 Department of Health and Social Care, Office for National Statistics, Government Actuary's Department and Home Office (2020). Direct and Indirect Impacts of COVID-19 on Excess Deaths and Morbidity: Executive Summary. Accessed here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/907616/s0650-direct-indirect-impacts-covid-19-excess-deaths-morbidity-sage-48.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907616/s0650-direct-indirect-impacts-covid-19-excess-deaths-morbidity-sage-48.pdf)
- 9 Bevan et al. Institute for Employment Studies. (2020). Homewoker wellbeing survey. Interim Findings. Accessed here: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/summarypdfs/IES%20Homewoker%20Wellbeing%20Survey%20Headlines%20-%20Interim%20Findings.pdf>
- 10 Versus Arthritis (2020). COVA – the COVID-19 Virtual Assistant. Accessed here: <https://www.versusarthritis.org/get-help/cova/>.