

ARTHRITIS SOCIETY CANADA ONTARIO 2024 PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS SUBMISSION

Delivered to:

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Arthritis Society Canada, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the 2024 pre-budget consultations.

Arthritis Society Canada is the country's national charity dedicated to extinguishing arthritis. We represent the six million Canadians, including 2.3 million Ontarians, living with arthritis today, and the millions more who are impacted or at risk. There is no cure for arthritis, and the pain it causes deprives people of time with friends and family, reduces mobility and diminishes quality of life. Arthritis is a leading cause of workplace disability and one of the major health challenges facing our health care system today. With a growing and aging population, the number of Ontarians living with arthritis is expected to grow. By 2035, more than 3.3 million Ontarians will have arthritis, many of them under the age of 65.

Our recently released [State of Arthritis in Canada Report Card](#) looks at how arthritis is being addressed in each province and territory based on three categories: Access to Care, Wellness, and Research and Innovation. **Ontario received a grade of C**, emphasizing the need for action and innovation in arthritis care, specifically better arthritis data, increased funding of arthritis research and better access to arthritis care.

6 million people in Canada live with arthritis.



As you conduct your budget consultations, we are pleased to provide our recommendations, that will help support the more than 2.3 million Ontarians living with arthritis today:

- 1) Support the Arthritis Rehabilitation and Education Program (AREP) including the Rapid Access Clinic Model for Rheumatology (Rheum-RAC) pilot project**
- 2) Continue to address wait times for joint replacements**
- 3) Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options**

1. Support the Arthritis Rehabilitation and Education Program (AREP) including the Rapid Access Clinic Model for Rheumatology (Rheum-RAC) pilot project

The Arthritis Rehabilitation and Education Program (AREP) is a \$5 million program delivered by Arthritis Society Canada with funding from the Ministry of Health. AREP aligns with the Government's goal of providing community-based care, serving rural and remote Ontarians, filling a need for those who don't have easy access to services. AREP diverts Ontarians living with arthritis from the high-cost acute care services and provides access to an innovative model of care that is best suited to their needs. The program provides community-based physiotherapy, occupational therapy and social work rehabilitation services and has been doing so for over 50 years.

AREP serves the entire province of Ontario with team members located in all major regions and clinical team members provide care and education to over 12 000 unique individuals per year. Patients are assessed and treated, with an emphasis on adaptations to ensure reduced pain, safe exercise, splinting, counselling on self-management strategies, and reinforcement of safe use of medications.

AREP has developed a pilot program for a Rapid Access Clinic (RAC) model for Rheumatology that would place Advanced Clinical Practitioners in Arthritis Care (ACPAC) therapists in primary care to serve as a conduit between family physicians and rheumatologists. Patients will be assessed by an ACPAC therapist who will work with the patient and primary care practitioner to determine the appropriate care pathway and facilitate streamlined access. The model is designed so that patients with active inflammatory arthritis can be fast-tracked to specialists and diagnostic services when indicated, to commence earlier treatment for better disease control, preventing further irreversible joint damage and disability. This short [video](#) explains the current challenge and proposed solution.

Government investment in this pilot program will support timely access to the right care at the right time from the right provider. If successful, the program will be expanded to other sites across the province.

2. Continue to address wait times for joint replacements

Arthritis is the leading cause of joint replacements, including over 99% of knee replacements and more than 70% of hip replacements. With the number of people with arthritis expected to balloon by 2035, even more people will need joint replacements.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), the benchmark wait time for hip and knee replacements is 182 days. The most recent [CIHI data](#) shows that 31% of Ontarians waiting for hip and knee replacement did not have their surgeries performed within the recommended time. Ontario Ministry of Health data also shows inconsistency across the province in meeting targets, with some regions have a much lower percentage meeting the six-month target.

This prolonged wait is leading to unnecessary pain and suffering for many Ontarians who are prevented from contributing to their families, communities, and workplaces. There are potential downstream health impacts that increased wait times could have for arthritis patients waiting for joint replacement surgery, such as the increased use of opioids for pain relief.

Surgery delays are not only devastating for individuals but can also lead to significant additional costs for the healthcare system due to the co-morbidities associated with the disease, including weight gain, diabetes, heart and circulatory issues, mental health conditions, and other compounding health challenges. Arthritis Society Canada's report [The Wait: Addressing Canada's Critical Backlog of Hip and Knee Replacement Surgeries](#) provides a wide-range of solutions to innovate and achieve effective patient-centred care both provincially and nationally.

We were pleased with the additional \$72 million investment in the 2023-24 budget to make surgeries available at community surgical and diagnostic centres and the recent announcement of expansion to help address wait times, including the involvement of Accreditation Canada. As the government moves forward on the initiative to expand community surgical centres, engagement with the arthritis community is vital to ensure all Ontarians have equitable and timely access to publicly funded quality care. We look forward to working with the Ontario government to make sure that people with arthritis waiting in unbearable pain, get the care they deserve.

3. Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options

Arthritis symptoms can range from mild to severe. Most people with arthritis experience chronic pain, fatigue, restricted mobility, lowered mood and other symptoms that can combine to erode their quality of life. Left untreated, inflammation can lead to significant and often irreparable damage to the affected areas, resulting in loss of function and disability. There is no cure - medications play a significant role in helping people manage their condition.

Pharmacological treatments are critical to the management of arthritis, which typically persists for many years, if not a lifetime. In the case of inflammatory arthritis, for example, treatments are still very much trial and error: what works for one person may not for another, and its about finding the right treatment at the right time. A range of choices and solutions is therefore critical.

Medical cannabis is also an important pain management option for many people living with arthritis. About 1 in 4 Canadians using medical cannabis use it to manage arthritis specifically. While cannabis for medical purposes requires a medical authorization by a healthcare professional, it is subject to sales and excise taxes, which is inconsistent with the taxation of prescription drugs and medical necessities. Exempting the provincial tax portion from the HST for medical cannabis would provide some financial relief for patients during this difficult time and underscore a clear and important distinction between medical versus recreational cannabis, paving the way for medical cannabis to be recognized and treated as medicine.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we urge the Government of Ontario to implement our key 2024 pre-Budget recommendations that will add cost-effective sustainability to the healthcare system and support a healthy population of Ontarians.

About Arthritis Society Canada

Arthritis Society Canada is the country's national charity dedicated to fighting the fire of arthritis with the fire of research, advocacy and information and support. With the support of our donors and volunteers, we are all in to end arthritis, so people with arthritis can live their best life free from arthritis. Arthritis Society Canada is accredited under Imagine Canada's Standards Program.