

COLLEGE: SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR ACCESS AND SUCCESS

Heading off to college is a significant time of transition for all teenagers. Having a chronic disease like juvenile arthritis means being more selective about where you go, knowing your educational rights and needs and how to get support and accommodations. Here's a starter guide.

1. Pick the “right” college. There are many factors that go into the choice of college. Finding a good fit both academically and socially is important, but there are some special considerations teens and young adults with arthritis should consider.

- The physical campus. Schedule a tour to evaluate classrooms, residence halls, libraries, cafeterias. Pay close attention to the following:
 - layout: expansive or contained
 - terrain: hilly or flat
 - accessibility: elevators, escalators, wheelchair ramps
- Access to medical care and specialists. Consider how easy or difficult it will be to travel to your current pediatric rheumatologist for regular checkups or flares. You'll also want medical resources nearby. Ask about the following:
 - campus health clinic – fees, hours, location, expertise and ability to handle or refer more urgent needs
 - community medical centers – distance of local physicians and health care facilities from campus
 - ongoing juvenile arthritis care – accessibility in time and distance to a local pediatric rheumatologist or rheumatologist with experience treating juvenile arthritis.
- Support for students with special needs. All schools should have the ability to provide some support and accommodations to students with disabilities. Some schools, however, will have more resources and staff dedicated to supporting students with specific needs. Ask about the following:
 - Organizational support - where do I go for help and how many personnel are dedicated to the support of students with disabilities?
 - Peer organizations – are there student organizations that offer advocacy, peer advisers, mentors and social support for students with disabilities?
 - Accommodations track record – how long has the school successfully implemented campus and classroom accommodations for students with disabilities?

2. Know your educational rights. Students in postsecondary schools are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but the requirements vary from those that apply to public elementary, middle and high schools. Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) are not available at the college level.

3. Make a list of accommodations. You can use an existing 504 plan or IEP as a starting point. Make sure to establish a plan even if accommodations are not required right away. Some accommodations may include:

- Priority scheduling, which facilitates placement in classes at optimal times and locations
- Assigned notetaker, permission to record lectures or use computer during classes
- Extra time to take tests or with assignments
- Excused absences due to health issues
- Special accommodations for labs or practicums
- Transportation to campus and around campus

- Accessible parking for classroom buildings and residence halls
- A dorm room with accessibility features, and located on the first floor or close to elevators

4. Schedule a meeting. Before the semester begins, seek out the dedicated support department for students with disabilities. The office may be identified as Disability Services, Student Disability Access Center or Academic Accessibility. Bring a list of questions and expected needs as the starting point for developing a 504 plan. Consult the college handbook or website for more information. If you will be living on campus, schedule a separate meeting with the Office of Housing/Residential Services to arrange housing accommodations.

5. Determine the required documentation. This may vary between colleges and by disability. Expect to provide the following:

- A letter from the treating physician or a form provided by the school that is completed by your doctor
- A copy of the 504 plan or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) used throughout pre-college schooling
- A description of the history, current symptoms and severity of your arthritis
- A description of your current functional limitations that will impact academic performance

6. Stay involved with the process. On campus, students are considered adults and are responsible for making arrangements. Even though parents can help get the initial plan in place and assist with bigger issues, students should complete the paperwork, attend all meetings and be familiar with grievance procedures.

7. Inform professors. The accommodations office should facilitate arrangements for the agreed-upon classroom accommodations, but establishing open communication with professors is the student's responsibility. Introduce yourself, explain your situation and your accommodation needs. Reinforce your commitment to the class.