

**Arthritis is the most common chronic disease in Canada and affects one in five New Brunswick voters. There are over 100 types of arthritis, and despite the misconception that it is only a disease of older adults, two-thirds of New Brunswick residents living with arthritis are younger than 65. It is the leading cause of disability in New Brunswick and represents a significant economic burden, both in terms of direct health care costs and indirect costs related to lost employment, sick leave, and absenteeism.**

**Health care delivery and cost of living are the two highest concerns for New Brunswick voters leading up to the October 21, 2024, provincial election. Arthritis affects approximately 170,000 New Brunswick residents, yet no comprehensive model of arthritis care is available across the province. The way people living with arthritis access and receive health care varies significantly across New Brunswick. Where you live can often have a greater impact on your treatment options than how severe your condition is. This particularly affects residents with inflammatory arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, axial spondylarthritis, psoriatic arthritis, or lupus, who depend on timely and accurate diagnosis, fast access to rheumatologists, and appropriate public reimbursement for necessary disease-modifying medications.**

**The political parties running in the upcoming provincial election have diverse policies on health care. If elected, what will your government do to improve the level of arthritis prevention, treatment, and care in New Brunswick?**

To improve the level of care people with arthritis are receiving we have to improve overall access to care. Our plans to recruit and retain doctors and nurses and establish community care clinics will help reduce the burden on our healthcare system. This will lead to higher quality care for people experiencing chronic conditions such as arthritis.

**The time to address models of care for arthritis is now. A major barrier is access to care, including long wait times for people with inflammatory arthritis seeking their first rheumatologist visit. There is an urgent need to explore, invest in, and innovate new care models that provide timely access to appropriate care and support for managing arthritis.**

**What will your government do to provide high-quality, accessible, evidence-based models of care, such as team-based care, for New Brunswick residents living with arthritis?**

A Holt government is committed to providing high-quality, accessible, evidence-based models of care for New Brunswickers living with arthritis. We understand that the current wait times for accessing care, particularly for those with inflammatory arthritis, are unacceptable, and we must act now to improve the situation.



Our health care plan focuses on team-based care, which brings together a variety of health professionals in one place. This approach will help streamline referrals to specialists and provide a healthcare home for patients so they can be properly monitored for whatever health conditions they face. This will ensure patients receive comprehensive care from diagnosis through ongoing management of their condition.

By exploring and investing in innovative models of care, we aim to reduce wait times, improve patient outcomes, and provide New Brunswickers living with arthritis the support they need to manage their condition and maintain a high quality of life.

**Indigenous Peoples in Canada have some of the highest rates of serious or life-threatening arthritis in the world and are at greater risk of becoming disabled by arthritis. Significant gaps in Indigenous arthritis care currently exist in New Brunswick. Care models, such as an Indigenous community-based patient care facilitator, which address health care in a culturally relevant manner and tackle the many barriers to care, have been proven to effectively resolve care gaps and optimize health outcomes for Indigenous Peoples with arthritis and related comorbidities.**

**Will your government introduce culturally appropriate, patient-centered policies to help Indigenous Peoples navigate the health care system and receive coordinated care within their community to manage their arthritis?**

We will work closely with First Nations leaders to create a bilateral forum that fosters open dialogue, collaboration, and joint decision-making aimed at achieving culturally safe and equitable healthcare for Indigenous people in New Brunswick. This forum will serve as a dedicated space where provincial health officials and First Nations communities can engage on a regular basis to identify challenges, develop solutions, and co-create policies that address the unique healthcare needs of Indigenous populations.

This approach will prioritize culturally appropriate care, ensuring that healthcare services respect Indigenous traditions, languages, and healing practices. We will also focus on addressing systemic barriers that Indigenous people face, such as access to healthcare facilities, long wait times, and a lack of Indigenous healthcare professionals.

**The next New Brunswick government must also take steps to ensure the sustainability of prescription drug plans and the continued affordability of prescription medicines for New Brunswick patients. The Health Ministry stated at the launch of the New Brunswick Biosimilars Initiative that it expected to save over \$10 million once fully implemented, thanks to people transitioning from originator biologics to their cost-effective biosimilars. These biosimilars are highly similar versions of high-cost biologic drugs used to treat chronic diseases like inflammatory arthritis.**



## **Will your government commit to reinvesting biosimilar savings to increase access to new medicines and expand coverage for existing medicines for people living with inflammatory arthritis?**

We will explore reinvesting the savings generated from biosimilar medicines to increase access to new and existing treatments for people living with inflammatory arthritis. We recognize the financial burden that managing chronic conditions like arthritis places on individuals and families, and we believe that every New Brunswicker should have access to the most effective treatments available.

By transitioning to biosimilar medicines, we can generate significant cost savings within the healthcare system. Reinvesting the savings to expand drug coverage is an option that should be explored. It is important to ensure that more patients can access newer, innovative therapies as they become available, while also improving coverage for existing treatments that help manage conditions like inflammatory arthritis.

Our commitment includes working closely with healthcare professionals, patient advocacy groups, and stakeholders to ensure any funding model or investments made are strategic and that patients receive timely access to the medications they need to improve their quality of life.

**Some individuals with severe osteoarthritis require joint replacement surgery to achieve better quality of life, less pain and more joint function. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the guideline for knee and hip replacement is to receive surgery within 26 weeks. In New Brunswick in 2023, only 38% of knee replacement patients and 42% of hip replacement patients were treated within that guideline and fell below the Canadian average. This deeply impacts the lives of New Brunswick residents with osteoarthritis who require these surgeries.**

## **Will your government take steps to ensure timely, specialized care for New Brunswick residents struggling with osteoarthritis, including joint replacement surgery wait times that are within medically recommended guidelines?**

When the healthcare system fails, it becomes nearly impossible for individuals with chronic conditions to receive proper monitoring and management. Our goal to establish at least 30 community care clinics across New Brunswick is aimed at ensuring that every resident has access to primary healthcare. This includes consistent monitoring of health conditions by a dedicated healthcare team that knows you and your medical history. They can streamline referrals to specialists, provide regular check-ups, and always be available when you need assistance.

We believe that by prioritizing community care clinics, extending operating room hours, addressing healthcare staffing shortages, and transitioning seniors from hospital beds to more



appropriate care settings, we can not only offer you a reliable primary care team but also reduce overall wait times for specialized services.

**Many Canadians are positively adapting to virtual care. A majority of respondents in a 2021 Arthritis Consumer Experts Survey reported they believe virtual care could save costs in the healthcare system and improve access to specialists and timeliness of test results. However, respondents who identified as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour were over 3 times more likely to report difficulties using virtual care services.**

**What will your government do to ensure the continuation, improvement, and expansion of virtual care for all New Brunswick residents – both patients and health care professionals – and ensure access is equitable to all?**

Expanding internet and cell coverage will significantly enhance access to virtual care for all communities. Reliable connectivity is essential for patients to access virtual consultations, receive remote monitoring, and communicate with healthcare providers in real time. With broader coverage, people in underserved regions will no longer have to travel long distances to access healthcare services. Improved digital infrastructure will bridge the healthcare gaps ensuring everyone has equitable access to virtual care and the benefits of modern healthcare technology.

