

2017 April Health Notes by Evelyn Ames Living with Arthritis

Arthritic diseases, of which there are over 100 different types and related conditions, is the leading cause of disability in the United States. Over 54 million people or 23% of all adults have some form of arthritis, which occurs more frequently as people age and is more common in women. Arthritis is reported by at least 1 in 6 adults in every state. The annual direct medical costs are at least \$81 billion. The most common type of arthritis, osteoarthritis, affects over 30 million adults. A person with OA may also have other chronic conditions (particularly heart disease and diabetes). This can present a reduced quality of life, making disease management harder. It becomes important for a person with arthritis to engage in lifestyle activities to manage symptoms of pain, aching, stiffness, and swelling in or around the joints.

Suggestions for managing symptoms

- Be physically active: People with arthritis should try to get at least 150 minutes of physical activity each week. This activity can be done for 30 minutes, 5 days a week, or for as little as 10 minutes at a time. Research shows that exercise is one of the best treatments for osteoarthritis. Exercise can improve mood and outlook, decrease pain, increase flexibility, strengthen the heart and improve blood flow, maintain weight, and promote general physical fitness. Exercise is also inexpensive and, if done correctly, has few negative side effects. The amount and form of exercise prescribed depends on which joints are involved, how stable the joints are, and whether a joint replacement has already been done. Walking, swimming, and water aerobics are a few of the popular types of exercise for people with arthritis and especially osteoarthritis. A person's doctor and/or physical therapist can recommend specific types of exercise. Attention to rest and periods of relief from stress on the joints are important.
- The following types of exercise are part of a well-rounded arthritis treatment plan: **Strengthening exercises** strengthen muscles that support joints affected by arthritis. They can be performed with weights or with exercise bands, or with inexpensive devices that add resistance. **Aerobic activities** such as brisk walking or low-impact aerobics get the heart pumping and can keep the lungs and circulatory system in shape. **Range-of-motion activities** keep joints flexible and limber. **Balance and agility exercises** help maintain daily living skills.
- Self-management education increases confidence in one's ability to manage arthritis.
- Maintaining a healthy weight helps protect the body's joints, especially knees and hips. People can reduce risk of knee osteoarthritis by controlling weight and avoiding types of activities that are more likely to cause joint injuries.
- Educating oneself about anti-inflammatory diets. (See web sites of the Arthritis Foundation that describe various foods, in particular the nightshade family, that may or may not cause inflammation.)
- Recommendations from health care providers (primary care doctor and/or rheumatologist) can motivate people to be physically active and join a self-management education program. People with inflammatory arthritis, like rheumatoid arthritis, have a better quality of life if they are diagnosed early, receive treatment, and learn how to manage their condition.
- Making changes around the home can help take stress off joints. If house work is causing stress in certain joints, it may necessary adjust the work area or change work tasks.
- Taking a warm shower in the morning may ease some pain.
- If prescribed medications, take them when and how they are to be taken.
- Consider Physical therapy. It can help improve muscle strength and the motion of stiff joints as well as balance. If therapy does not make one feel better after 6 to 8 weeks, then it likely will not work at all.

Historical tidbit: Described in ancient Egyptian medical texts, arthritis -- particularly gout -- was one of the earliest diseases to be clinically recognized. Hippocrates (~460-357 BC) differentiated gout from other forms of arthritis, while an ayurvedic medicine text from 123 AD references a disease characterized by swollen, painful joints and occasional fever -- in all likelihood, rheumatoid arthritis (RA). The earliest OA treatments, dating as far back as the Sumerians, were most likely various willow preparations. Willow bark and leaves contain salicylic acid, which the German company Bayer modified to acetylsalicylic acid, or aspirin, in 1897.

Resources: <https://medlineplus.gov/healthtopics.html>

<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/nih-almanac/national-institute-arthritis-musculoskeletal-skin-diseases-niams>

<http://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/understanding-arthritis/what-is-arthritis.php>

<https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/aag/arthritis.htm>