

How to Care for Yourself

Think there's nothing you can do about arthritis? Great news! You can act right now. Some of the ideas here are simple, one-time actions. Others are first steps toward longer-term goals. All can directly or indirectly improve your health, outlook or pain level, and can generally make life with arthritis a little easier.

- **Pay attention to symptoms, see your doctor and get an accurate diagnosis**

If you have pain, stiffness or swelling in or around a joint for more than two weeks, it's time to see your doctor. These symptoms can develop suddenly or slowly. Only a doctor can tell if it's arthritis. But "you have arthritis" is not a diagnosis. Ask for a specific diagnosis of the type of arthritis you have. There are more than 100 types, each of which has different treatments. Getting the right treatment requires getting the right diagnosis.

- **Start early**

The earlier an accurate diagnosis is made and treatment started, the better. Early treatment can often mean less joint damage and less pain. Your doctor may recommend a combination of treatments that may include medication, weight management, exercise, use of heat or cold, and methods to protect your joints from further damage. See your doctor for an early diagnosis and immediate treatment plan!

- **Protect your joints**

Avoid excess stress on your joints. Use larger or stronger joints to carry things. Assistive devices can make tasks at home and work easier. Staying close to your recommended weight also helps relieve damaging pressure on hips and knees.

- **Get moving**

Exercise helps lessen pain, increases range of movement, reduces fatigue and helps you feel better overall. Your doctor, a physical therapist, or other specially trained health professionals can show you range-of-motion exercises and strengthening exercises that are good for arthritis. The Arthritis Foundation also offers water exercise and other classes. Contact your local office for details.

- **Tune in**

Listening to your favorite music can lighten your mood and may even help you to forget your pain – at least for a little while. Make a tape of your favorite upbeat tunes and listen to it when you need a lift.

- **Pick, pour or peel**

If you are looking for a tasty healthy treat, reach for an orange – or a tall glass of orange juice. Why? Recent research has shown the importance of vitamin C and other antioxidants in reducing the risk of osteoarthritis and its progression. Another bonus: oranges and other citrus fruits are good sources of folic acid, which can help alleviate the side effects of the arthritis drug methotrexate and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease in women who have lupus.

- **Check out your options**

In the past two years, the FDA has approved several drugs for rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis and other arthritis-related diseases. If your current medication isn't working as well as you'd like – or if it's causing unacceptable side effects – ask your doctor about these new treatment options. Check out the online [drug guide](#) and [supplement guide](#).

- **Let yourself go**

On vacation, that is. Make yours a good one by remembering to bring extra medication, a spare prescription, insurance card, comfortable shoes, your doctor's phone number and, of course, your camera.

- **Face facts.**

Learn something new about arthritis. Building an understanding of your disease is an important step in managing it.

- **Play in the dirt**

Buy the seeds for three of your favorite veggies or flowers and plant a garden. Digging in the dirt can be therapeutic for sore hands and can yield beautiful and fragrant – or delicious and nutritious – results.

- **Have a good laugh**

Read a book of jokes, rent a funny movie or watch your favorite sit-com or stand-up comedian. Laughing – even when you feel like crying from agony – can relax muscles, relieve pain and even boost your immune system.

- **Play it safe in the sun**

Protect yourself when you go out into the sun — wear sunglasses, a hat and sun screen. Some forms of arthritis, as well as certain medications, can leave you more vulnerable to the sun's harmful rays.

- **Do Tell**

Take an opportunity to tell someone — co-worker, friend, and family member — about arthritis. Start with an interesting fact: Did you know that arthritis affects 46 million people? Then go from there. They'll understand you – and the way arthritis affects your life – a little better.

Resolve to reduce

Lose weight. You won't just look better, you'll feel better, too. Why? Every extra pound you carry around translates to added stress to your knees and hips. Excess weight can mean more pain, no matter which form of arthritis you have. It can also contribute to and aggravate osteoarthritis, while increasing your risk of gout. L

- **Bone up**

Stock up on your favorite source of calcium. A diet rich in this important mineral can help decrease your risk of osteoporosis. If you don't like drinking milk – or want some variety – try consuming more milk products, such as yogurt, cheese and ice cream. Or add powdered milk to puddings, gravies, shakes and other recipes. Other good sources of calcium: broccoli, salmon (with the bones) and kale.

- **Do drugs – the right way**

Take your medication just as your doctor prescribes. If you're tempted to stop because you feel it's not working or you believe it's causing side effects, call your doctor first. It can take weeks – or even months – for the full benefits of a medication to become apparent, and some side effects ease over time. Stopping a medication abruptly may not only cause you to miss out on its benefits – in some cases it can be downright dangerous.

- **Begin with breakfast**

Put up the pastry and grab some fruit, fiber (like oatmeal) and a tall glass of water instead of coffee. Like you've always heard, a healthful breakfast is a great way to start the day. **Try this on for size**

It's time to toss those fashionable, yet oh, so uncomfortable pumps that cramp your toes, rub your heels and squeeze your bunions. A well padded, well fitting shoe with plenty of room for your toes – and their imperfections – can make a world of difference in the way your feet (and the rest of you) feel.

- **Take a hike**

Choose your favorite spots (indoors and out) and make plans to walk them at least once a week. Walking is the ideal exercise for most people with arthritis. It burns calories, strengthens muscles and builds denser bones – all without jarring fragile joints. Want to know more about walking as exercise?

- **Sit, soak and soothe**

A warm bath before bed can relieve muscle tension, ease aching joints and help you get a good night's sleep.

- **Treat your muscles**

Find a certified massage therapist and treat yourself to a good rub down. The benefits vary from person to person but may include decreased pain and increased circulation, energy and flexibility. And besides, it just feels good.

- **Work smarter**

Do something that will make your job easier — check into working flex hours, telecommuting or working part-time. No matter where or when you work, take frequent breaks to stretch stiff joints and sore muscles.

- **Fess up**

Be sure to tell your doctor about the medications you're taking, both prescription and over the counter. Don't forget to mention any nutritional supplements you're taking, too. All medications – even natural ones – have the potential to cause side effects or to react adversely with each other.

- **Write away**

Keeping a journal is fun and therapeutic. Best of all, there are no rules. Write about your feelings, fears, frustrations and fun times. Write about things you'd never tell another living soul. Write about anything – or nothing in particular. Just write.

- **Stretch your legs**

Stretching is a simple way to keep joints and muscles flexible. It relieves stress and can help enable you to maintain your daily activities. Try this to keep your calf muscles strong and flexible: Stand two feet from a wall, with your toes pointed inward palms against the wall. Keeping your knees straight and feet flat, lean forward onto your hands without bending at the waist. Feel your calf muscles pull and extend. Hold this position for 10 seconds, then gently push away from the wall. Repeat.

- **Take the plunge**

Exercising in the water can build strength and increase range of motion, while the water's buoyancy reduces wear and tear on sore joints. Check the local YMCA or call your local Arthritis Foundation office for an aquatic exercise program in your area.

- **Make a pack**

When joints are hot and inflamed, applying something cold can decrease pain and swelling by constricting blood vessels and preventing fluids from leaking into surrounding tissues. Our favorite ice pack: a bag of frozen peas or corn that can be molded to the shape of your body.

- **Kick butt**

If only for a day, and then another ... and another. Smoking can increase your risk of complications from lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. It can predispose you to osteoporosis. Also, if you have to undergo joint surgery, smoking can prolong your recovery.

- **Open your heart**

Select a group that holds a special place in your heart — the elderly, the homeless, animals — and volunteer with an organization that helps them. Or raise money for a cause you believe in. Helping others can be a great way to help you forget your own problems – or at least put them into perspective.

- **Enjoy Your Exercise**

Take the work out of working out. Sign up for a class that makes exercise fun – country line dancing, ballroom dancing, swimming, yoga or tai chi.

- **Play 20 questions**

Well, maybe not 20, but write down questions about your condition or your medications as you think of them. Prioritize them and slip them into your purse or wallet before your next doctor's visit. When you see the doctor, you'll have your top concerns at your fingertips.

- **Appeal to a higher power**

No one knows exactly how, but research is showing that spiritual belief and prayer can help people feel better physically and emotionally.

- **Turn the other cheek**

Looking good helps you feel good. If an arthritis-related condition or its treatment has caused a rash on or tightening or swelling of your face, check at the cosmetics counter of your local department store for tips or special products to camouflage these problems and give your cheeks a healthy looking glow.