

Education

Coping with Arthritis

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a condition that causes pain and stiffness of one or more joints. Sometimes it also causes redness or swelling.

There are different kinds of arthritis. Two common forms are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Will the arthritis get worse as I get older?

Osteoarthritis, a type of arthritis that results from the wearing down of joints, almost always tends to get worse over time. The older you get, the more worn your joints become. Rheumatoid arthritis causes inflammation (redness and swelling), stiffness, and deformity, especially in the joints of the hands, arms, and feet and can get worse over time.

But arthritis need not disable you. For example, being overweight puts strain on the weight-bearing joints in the spine, hips, and knees. You can protect these joints from further damage by controlling your weight. Also, muscles and joints that are not used tend to stiffen up. You can protect yourself against stiffening up by gently exercising your muscles and joints.

How much should I exercise?

You need to exercise just enough to keep your muscles strong and joints mobile. It is much better to exercise often for short periods of time and to rest in between than to exercise strenuously every once in awhile. Exercise gently without straining or jarring your joints. Wear comfortable, well-cushioned shoes, and avoid high-impact activities such as jogging on hard surfaces like concrete.

You can do some exercises sitting down; for example, tightening and then relaxing different muscles. Exercising in a warm swimming pool is good, too. The water supports your weight while you move, and the warmth helps improve joint movement.

Should I use heat or ice?

Both heating pads and ice packs can help reduce pain and stiffness in a joint. Try both and see what works best for you. You might find it helpful to put heat on your joints before gentle exercise and then to use ice afterward.

Can arthritis be cured or controlled?

So far, there is no cure for arthritis, but medicine can control the pain and reduce inflammation so that you can keep moving. Many medicines for arthritis, such as aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen can be bought without a prescription. Because there are different kinds of arthritis, you should talk to your health care provider about which medicines are best for you and the type of arthritis you have. When you take medicine, make sure you do not take more than the recommended dosage.

Most of the time, acetaminophen is the best medicine to use to relieve pain. It has fewer side effects than other pain relievers when used for a long time.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are other drugs used to treat pain. Aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen are NSAIDs that you may buy with or without a prescription. Adults over the age of 65 should not take NSAIDs for more than 5 days without their health care provider's approval. NSAIDs help reduce pain and swelling but can cause kidney and stomach problems.

COX-2 inhibitors such as celecoxib (Celebrex) are prescription NSAIDs. COX-2 drugs may cause fewer stomach problems than other NSAIDs. While they may help arthritis symptoms, COX-2 inhibitors have been linked to a greater risk of heart attacks and stroke. Talk with your health care provider about this.

Nutritional supplements such as glucosamine and ginger may help relieve pain. Yoga and acupuncture may help reduce pain and stiffness in the joints.

Many devices are available to help you stay independent despite arthritis. These devices include canes and walkers; bath seats and grab bars for the bathtub; and larger grips on tools, utensils, pens, and pencils. Velcro fasteners on clothes and shoes are very useful, too. Your health care provider can advise you about physical therapy, occupational therapy, and special devices that may help you.

Joints can sometimes be surgically corrected or replaced. Your health care provider can advise you about this option.

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