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What Else Causes Joint Pain?

Strain and overuse. Sports injury, repetitive stress (such as from typing on a keyboard, playing a musical instrument, cutting hair, or working with tools and machinery), lifting incorrectly and having poor posture are major causes of joint pain. Repeated overuse and strain may also cause conditions such as bursitis (inflammation of small sacs within the joint) and tendonitis (inflammation of a tendon, the connective tissue around a joint).

Other rheumatic conditions. Systemic lupus erythematosus (lupus), scleroderma, fibromyalgia, spondylitis and Reiter's syndrome are examples of chronic rheumatic conditions. They may have symptoms similar to arthritis but differ in important ways and have specific treatments.

Diagnosis: If joint pain and inflammation keep you from performing regular activities or do not go away, see your health care provider. Your provider will take a detailed medical and family history and perform tests such as X-rays and blood work to determine whether you have arthritis.

Remember: Protect your joints by adjusting your work space to avoid awkward movements, over-reaching or straining. Lift correctly, stand and sit with good posture, and wear the right protective equipment. Also, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and eat a balanced diet. Taking good care of yourself overall helps keep your joints working smoothly.

Don't Get "Quacked"

A quick Internet search turns up hundreds of Web sites advertising "cures" for everything from dandruff to cancer. Arthritis sufferers may be especially vulnerable to promises of a pain-free future. Don't be fooled into paying for untested treatments that may not work and could even be harmful. Use your own common sense and follow your health care provider's advice. Signs of medical quackery:

- The promises sound too good to be true (they usually are).
- Claims that the medical community, pharmaceutical companies or the government are conspiring to keep you in the dark about the latest treatments.
- Use of false medical jargon, such as promises to "detoxify," "balance," or "restore energy to organs."
- "Secret" medical research — true reputable scientists make their claims public and use approved testing methods.

How Can I Help Myself?

- Listen to your body and rest when you are in pain.
- Avoid stressful situations and find healthy ways to relax.
- Change positions frequently so you don't get stiff.
- Use your largest, strongest muscles to perform tasks (such as lifting with your legs, or using your entire arm instead of just your hands and fingers to reach for and open things).
- Exercise to stay strong and flexible.
- Learn new techniques for performing activities and use assistance devices.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Get support from family, friends, your church, an employee assistance program and counselors.

Your best tool: A positive outlook. Optimism has been proven to help people manage nearly all chronic conditions, and arthritis is no exception.

Medical Editor: Elizabeth Smoots, MD

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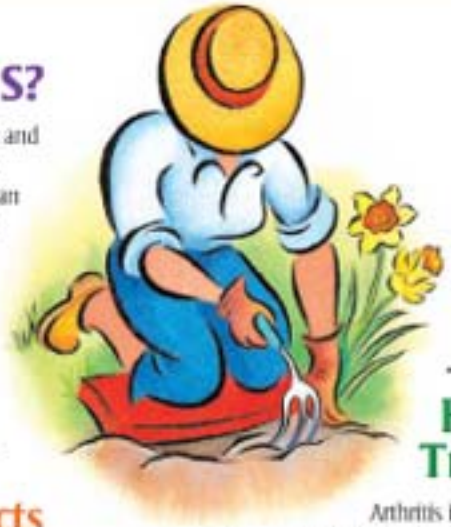
ARTHRITIS
Your Guide for Pain Management and Prevention

SAMPLE

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Arthritis causes stiffness and pain in the joints. It is a chronic condition and can lead to permanent joint damage, disability and difficulty working and carrying out everyday activities. There are many different types of arthritis, the causes of which are unknown.



Arthritis Facts

Osteoarthritis is the most common type. It is most often seen in middle-aged and older people, although it can happen at any age from joint injury or overuse. It usually affects the knees, hips and spine and can range from very mild to severe. A degenerative disease, osteoarthritis gradually wears away the cartilage covering the ends of the bones as the joint is used.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) mainly affects people over 30, although it can strike at any age. RA produces chemicals that destroy the joint surface and inflame both the joint lining and the tissue around the joint. It mostly affects the hands and feet, although the hips, knees and elbows may also be affected. Joints can lose their shape and alignment, resulting in pain and loss of movement.

The good news: Although there is no cure for arthritis, many treatments and self-care techniques are available. Your first step to greater freedom of movement and less pain is learning all you can about the condition.

Beat Arthritis By Staying Active

The key to arthritis management is finding balance between activity and rest — exercising too much may stress sensitive joints, while being too sedentary can cause stiffness and immobility. ***Try this:***

Stretching and gentle movement. Yoga, Tai Chi and stretching are easy on the joints and keep joints fluid and supple.

Aerobic activity. Exercises such as riding a bike, swimming and water aerobics keep the heart healthy and the muscles strong without putting too much pressure on joints.

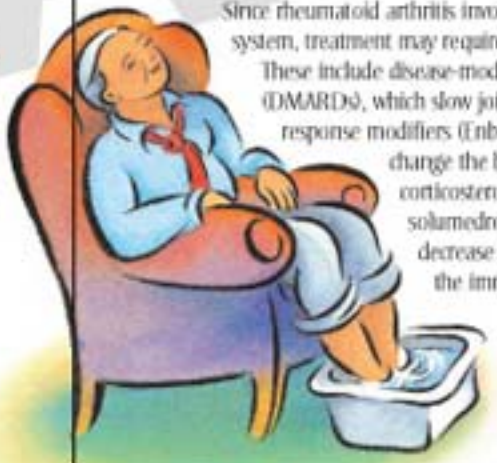
Remember: Listen to your body. Stop exercising if you experience sharp pain and don't try to "work through" joint discomfort. Find activities that are gentle on your body and take them at a comfortable pace.

How Is Arthritis Treated?

Arthritis is often treated by a team of health care professionals, which may include physical and occupational therapists, social workers or counselors, surgeons, rehabilitation specialists and, in the case of rheumatoid arthritis, rheumatologists. Members of your health care team will determine the best course of treatment. Treatments may include:

Medication: Your health care provider may recommend over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs (such as aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen) or prescription anti-inflammatory drugs to reduce pain and inflammation. Discuss your options with your health care provider since some cause more stomach irritation or other side effects than others.

Since rheumatoid arthritis involves the body's immune system, treatment may require special prescription drugs. These include disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), which slow joint damage; biological response modifiers (Enbrel, Remicade, Kineret), which change the body's immune response; and corticosteroids (prednisone, cortisone, solumedrol, hydrocortisone), which decrease inflammation and suppress the immune system.



Joint Protection: There are many devices for joint protection, including tools for reaching, opening and dressing; railings and extenders for household and workplace furniture; canes, splints and braces to support joints; and padded grips for tools. Joint protection may also involve learning new ways to perform activities that do not put stress on the joints.

Surgery: Surgical techniques include arthroscopic surgery (a small scope and other instruments are inserted into the joint), bone fusion (bones in the joint are fused together), or arthroplasty (damaged joints are removed or replaced).

Other Therapies:

Hydrotherapy. Exercising or relaxing in warm water. Water relieves the pressure of gravity on joints, making it easier to move and relax.

Mobilization therapy. This includes traction (gentle pulling), massage and joint manipulation. It is performed by a trained professional and can help control pain and increase mobility.

Relaxation therapy. Stress and muscle tension make arthritis symptoms worse. This therapy teaches techniques that help relieve tension.

Heat and cold. Heat increases blood flow and flexibility. Hot treatments include paraffin wax, microwaves and ultrasound. Cold constricts blood vessels and numbs nerves around a joint, reducing pain and swelling. Cold therapies include ice packs, soaking in cold water, and sprays and ointments that cool the skin and joints.

Nutritional supplements. Supplements such as SAM-e, DHEA, glucosamine and chondroitin have shown some effectiveness in arthritis treatment. But few of these claims have been scientifically proven. Talk with your provider before taking supplements, which may sometimes have risks.