

A Pain in the Joint:

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Living with Arthritis



Stiff, achy, arthritic joints can make daily life more difficult. Luckily, there are ways to lessen the pain and get on with the activities you enjoy.

Arthritis takes two common forms: Rheumatoid Arthritis and Osteoarthritis.

- Rheumatoid arthritis causes inflammation in your joints.
 - It often affects many joints at one time and can happen at any age.
- Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis, affecting millions of Americans every year.
 - This is a degenerative disease that affects the cartilage in your joints through “wear and tear.”
 - Osteoarthritis can occur through the overuse or injury of your joints. The most commonly affected joints include your hands, back, hips and knees.
 - Osteoarthritis generally starts in a small area and results in bone-on-bone contact. This causes swollen, painful and stiff joints.



To determine if you are truly suffering from arthritis or if something else is causing your pain, seek out medical care. Your primary care physician can do a preliminary exam and then refer you to an orthopedic specialist. An orthopedic doctor will take your medical history and examine your affected joint with range-of-motion tests, joint-line tenderness tests and evaluation of potential deformities. The orthopedic doctor will likely also order a round of x-rays to better see what could be happening inside the joint.

After a thorough exam, your orthopedic doctor will work with you to determine the best way to manage your pain. While arthritis can be managed and treated through a variety of methods, doctors often recommend exercise as a first line of treatment and prevention of further damage to your joints.

“You need to keep your joints moving and have regular low-impact activity of some sort to try to keep your joints as healthy as they can be,” says Dean Clinic Orthopedic Surgeon, Dr. Brian Steffin.

While stiff joints can make it hard to exercise, the movement acts as nourishment for your cartilage. By nourishing the cartilage between the bones in your joints, you can extend the life of your joints.

Low-impact exercises are highly recommended for people with arthritic hips and knees. Such exercises include: Walking, biking, hiking, swimming and water aerobics, and working with a physical therapist to find and perform exercises designed specifically to increase your range of motion in an arthritic joint.

In some cases, over-the-counter pain medication can also lessen the pain of arthritis. Medications like acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil) and naproxen (Aleve) can help in reducing pain and swelling within your joints. Other helpful

medications include topical creams like capsaicin. You should check with your doctor before starting any new pain relief regimen. They can help you avoid interactions with other medications you may be taking.

You can also combine these over-the-counter pain medications with ice or heat, as follows:

- Ice can decrease local blood circulation and swelling. This can decrease your pain and improve exercise tolerance.
- Applying heat to the joint will increase local blood circulation and help your joints and muscles stretch. This can decrease any muscle aches.

In more serious or advanced cases of arthritis, doctors will recommend stronger methods of pain relief, including cortisone injections and either arthroscopic surgery or total joint replacement surgery. Typically, these measures are taken when all other methods of treatment no longer provide relief. Dr. Steffin advises that you see an orthopedic doctor before your arthritis pain starts affecting your overall health.

“Don’t wait so long that you’re avoiding all exercise,” says Dr. Steffin. “You don’t have to be miserable and sitting on the couch in pain before you seek treatment for your arthritis.”

In the end, addressing your arthritis pain will not only make you feel better, it will also help you stay active doing the things you enjoy most. ▀