

Top Things You Can Do for Your Arthritis



Arthritis affects many people, and it is becoming more common. It can cause pain and affect your mobility (movement), keeping you from doing the things you want to do. There are many things you can do to help better manage your pain and improve your function.

1. Get the correct diagnosis

There are many causes of joint pain. Work with members of your health care team to get the correct diagnosis, so you can make the right plan for you.

2. Do more physical activity

Physical activity is a key part of managing arthritis. Think of how you can be more active every day. Cardiovascular and strengthening exercises can help your joints to stay healthy longer. Increase exercise over time, as tolerated.

- Work towards 30 minutes of moderate physical activity 5 days a week.
- Activities such as walking, biking, yoga, and tai chi can help. If you find these activities painful, consider swimming, aqua fit, or walking in a pool.

3. Change your activities

There are many things you can do to put less strain on your joints:

- Avoid activities that cause you to sit or slouch for long periods.
- Sit in chairs that are high and have arms. This makes it easier to sit down and get up.
- During long trips, get up and move around every hour to avoid stiff joints.
- Try to limit high-impact activities like running, that put a lot of strain on your joints. Pace yourself by switching between heavy/repetitive tasks and lighter tasks. Take breaks as needed.
- Walk where you can take breaks on benches or chairs.
- Avoid squatting, kneeling, twisting, and sitting on low seats, as these may hurt your joints.

4. Keep a healthy weight

Being overweight can make your arthritis symptoms worse by putting extra stress on your joints. Healthy eating can help to improve your overall health.

- Losing as little as 5% of your body weight may help lower your pain.
- Choose whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and low fat or plant-based protein foods will help. Processed foods (like salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats) may increase your symptoms and risk for chronic (ongoing) health conditions.
- Talk with a dietitian about options for healthy eating and weight management. Find a dietitian at a grocery store, community health team, or nutrition education centers at your local hospital (check to see if a referral is needed or if you can self-refer).
- Research has shown that some vitamin and mineral supplements can help improve arthritis symptoms. These include omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, antioxidants, and glucosamine.

Be sure to talk with your health care team before starting any supplements, as they may affect your medications.

5. Use heat and cold

Use heat and/or cold to help with pain and increase flexibility. Heat increases blood flow, which can help relax muscles. Cold decreases blood flow, which can help lower joint pain and swelling.

- Use cold packs/ice packs for 10 to 15 minutes at a time (each hour). Watch your skin for numbness and a change in colour.
- Apply heat for 10 to 20 minutes at a time with 10 minute breaks in between. Don't use if your joint is red, hot, or swollen, or if you have an open wound or skin condition (such as an irritation, psoriasis, an infection, etc.). Do not reapply until the effect of the heat is gone.
- You may want to buy a gel pack that can be kept cold in a freezer or a hot pack that can be heated in a microwave.

6. Use orthotics, bracing, or self-help aids

Self-help aids may help to decrease stress on your joints and conserve your energy.

- Canes, walkers, or walking poles can help with pain and discomfort when walking or standing.
- Wear shoes with shock absorption. Rubber soles and gel or silicone inserts can lower your pain when walking.
- Talk with your primary health care provider about bracing options to help with support and balance.
- Use raised toilet seats and raise your bed height to make it easier to sit down and get up.
- Using a pillow between your legs may help with comfort while sleeping.
- Use tools that help lower stress on your joints, such as electric can/jar openers, large-handled utensils, adaptive cutting boards with suction cups, shoe horns, sock aids, long-handled reachers/scrubbers, and door levers instead of knobs, etc.

7. Talk with your primary health care provider or pharmacist about medications

Some over-the-counter medications can help with the symptoms of arthritis.

- Certain creams or gels may help relieve minor pain and discomfort.
- Pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) are also generally safe and effective in relieving minor pain and discomfort. However, they do not reduce the inflammation caused by arthritis.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) and naproxen (Aleve®), may help with joint swelling and inflammation.

Be sure to talk with your health care team before starting any medications or supplements.

Depending on how bad your symptoms are and the type of arthritis you have, your primary health care provider may prescribe other medications.

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8. Consider injections

Injections in your joint(s) may help with swelling and pain. Symptoms usually start to get better after a few days and relief from injections can last for a few months to a year.

Talk with your primary health care provider or surgeon about whether injections may be right for you. They will counsel you on what type of injection would be suitable for your condition.

9. Consider surgery

If you have hip or knee joint arthritis, your primary health care provider can refer you to a surgeon through an Orthopedic Assessment Clinic (OAC), to find out if surgery is right for you. The OAC team will assess you, and help you create an arthritis action plan.

- **Hip/knee replacement** involves replacing the worn-out surfaces of the hip or knee joint with metal and plastic parts (implants).

These parts will help restore function and lower discomfort as much as possible, and let you return to a more active lifestyle.

Your primary health care provider can refer you to an orthopedic surgeon to see if surgery is needed for your shoulder, elbow, wrist, hand, or ankle arthritis.

- **Shoulder replacement surgery** replaces the ball end of the shoulder with a metal ball. The socket may or may not be replaced with a plastic socket.

- **Elbow/wrist/hand joints** - These joints can often be treated without surgery. However, a fusion (2 bones permanently connected together so they can't bend) or replacement surgery is sometimes needed.
- **Ankle surgery** - Ankle surgery may involve fusion of the ankle (most common) or a total ankle replacement.

There are many things you can do to help manage your arthritis pain. The sooner you see a health care provider, the more options you may have to manage your pain and improve your movement and strength. This may help you to keep doing the things you love. Talk with your health care provider about options that may work for you.



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