

Arthritis – you can do something about it

The type of arthritis we are referring to and which commonly affects older people is called osteoarthritis. As you get older (or sometimes because of an injury), the joints of the body may become worn and damaged. This can cause pain, stiffness and sometimes swelling in the joints, especially in the fingers, spine, knee and hip. But although there's no cure, there's a lot you can do to relieve the symptoms.

How does being active help this type of arthritis?

People often think that having arthritis means that you should do as little as possible. Keeping physically active and doing regular exercise can:

- keep joints flexible and prevent stiffness (this can reduce pain),
- strengthen bones and muscles,
- help control weight (extra kilos put more pressure on knee joints and increase pain), and
- make you feel more relaxed.

Which physical activities help arthritis?

Any activities that keep you moving help arthritis. The best time to be active is when you feel less stiffness, have the least pain, and when your medication is working best. Suggestions for physical activities include:

- Everyday chores like sweeping, cleaning, hanging out washing and gardening all help keep you flexible.
- Going for regular walks (at least three times weekly).
- Try swimming, cycling or dancing.

Ask your doctor or local community health centre if the following low cost activities are available in your area:

- **Gentle exercise classes.**
These classes (some are bilingual) teach simple exercises which help you stay stronger and more flexible.
- **Tai Chi.**
Exercises use simple flowing movements which improve strength and flexibility.
- **Water exercises.**
Exercising in water is great for arthritis. The water bears your weight so there's less pressure on your joints. Exercise classes (aquarobics) are available at swimming pools in many areas.

Aquatic physiotherapy (also known as hydrotherapy) is a specially designed exercise program in warm water used to help many conditions including arthritis. It is available through some physiotherapy departments and public hospitals at no cost. A physiotherapist can also suggest other helpful exercises.

What's the best medication for osteoarthritis pain?

Ask your doctor to suggest the best treatment.

Will special foods improve osteoarthritis?

Although there's no food that can cure arthritis, healthy eating is important. Tips from the Arthritis Foundation of NSW include:

- Eat a variety of healthy foods.
- Enjoy fresh fish regularly. It contains healthy fat (omega-3 fat). This may help reduce inflammation in the joints. Mullet, trevally, flathead, sardines and salmon are especially high in omega-3 fat. Canned sardines and salmon (preferably canned in spring water or brine, not oil) are good too.
- Use spreads made with canola or olive oil. Use these oils for cooking and salad dressings. For people with arthritis, canola or olive oil are preferable to sunflower, safflower, corn, peanut or soybean oil.

Will herbal or other non-drug remedies help arthritis?

These remedies can't cure arthritis, but some can help to ease pain and stiffness. According to the Arthritis Foundation of NSW, there's some evidence that glucosamine, chondroitin (available from health food stores and some pharmacies) fish oil capsules, ginger, and some traditional Chinese medicines may help. Fish oil capsules are preferable to cod liver oil capsules, as large doses of cod liver oil may be dangerous. Remember that, like other medicines, non-drug remedies may have side effects or may affect other medicines you take. Always tell your doctor which remedies you're taking and follow the directions on the package.

For more information, contact the Arthritis Foundation of NSW on (02) 9683 1622.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.