

Arthritis

Physical Activity - Pain and stiffness increases with inactivity, which is why arthritis symptoms are worse in the morning. Although you may have a tendency to avoid using painful joints, it is one of the worst things you can do. Muscle tissue of people with arthritis starts to waste away in only three to six days if the person does not use the affected areas. Lack of use results in a loss of strength and flexibility which will lead to more pain. Exercise will relieve stiffness, help maintain flexibility, and protect joints by building muscles. Swimming, stretching, t'ai chi and yoga along with other regular physical activities are very effective. Your doctor may want to refer you to a physiotherapist who can assist you in developing an effective exercise program.

Joint protection - Protect your joints from extra stress by finding ways to make daily tasks easier. Alternating between difficult tasks and easier tasks and taking rests between tasks is an effective strategy. There are many devices available to assist with your everyday activities such as braces, grab bars, reaching aids, raised chairs, shower seats, canes, etc. Your doctor, physiotherapist or an occupational therapist can advise you on the use of many of these items.

Weight management - Losing excess weight will reduce the stress on weight-bearing joints and thus reduce the pain in these areas.

Heat and cold - Depending on your symptoms, both can effectively provide temporary pain relief. Heat relaxes muscles and relieves joint pain while cold reduces swelling in inflamed joints and numbs affected areas. Everyone responds to heat and cold treatment differently so experiment to find what you prefer. Some people have found alternating heat and cold for 5-minute periods very effective.

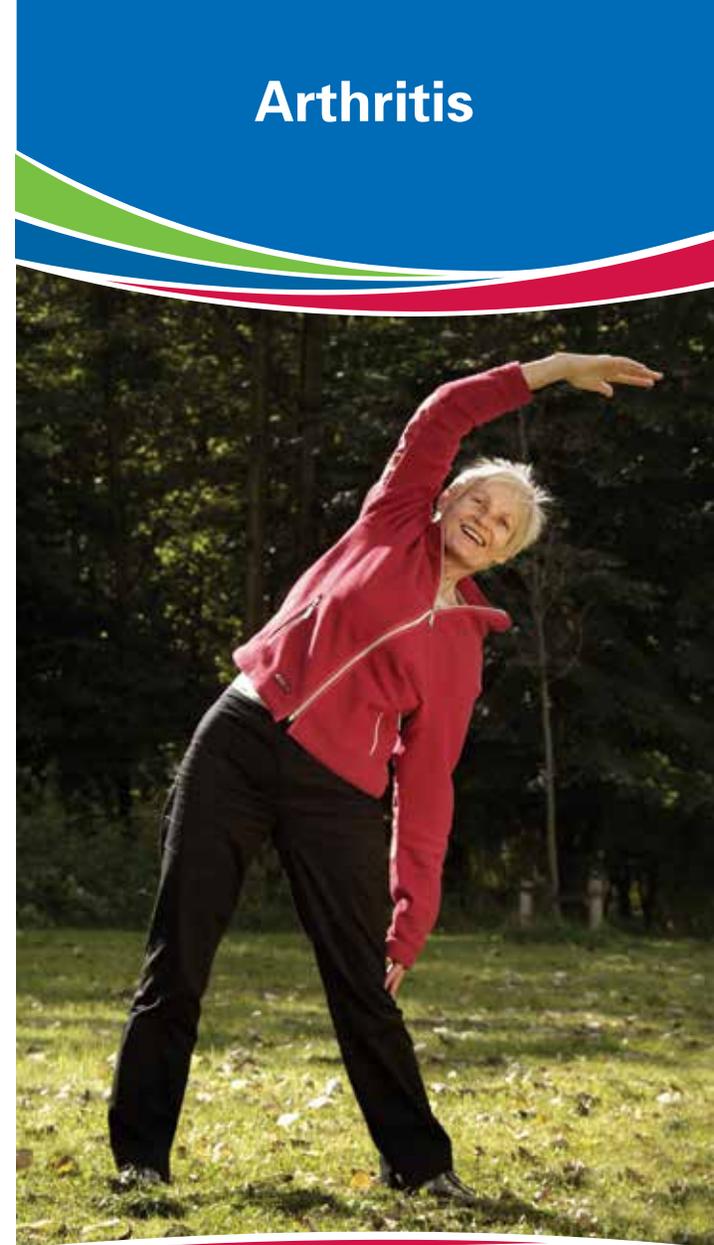


Relaxation and stress reduction - Stress causes tension in your muscles and joints which then causes pain. On the other hand, pain causes stress and tension. Learning to relax may be difficult, but is well worth the effort. As the muscles relax, your body releases endorphins, which are pain-relieving hormones. Laughter is one of the best known activities to release these endorphins and therefore is one of the best medicines.

Surgery - Although most people don't like to consider surgery, if you have advanced arthritis and your day to day living is steadily diminishing, it may be necessary. From removing loose bone chips or cartilage to knee and hip replacements, surgery is now quite common and effective as a treatment for some forms of arthritis.

Attitude - A positive attitude and taking responsibility for yourself and your treatment is important. You have to learn to accept some limitations and be willing to change your lifestyle. Everyone reacts differently to the disease. Some sit inactively at home and become depressed while others charge on at full speed. Both reactions only cause further damage. The key is to establish priorities, set goals, reevaluate your lifestyle and adapt to find the middle ground that best works for you.

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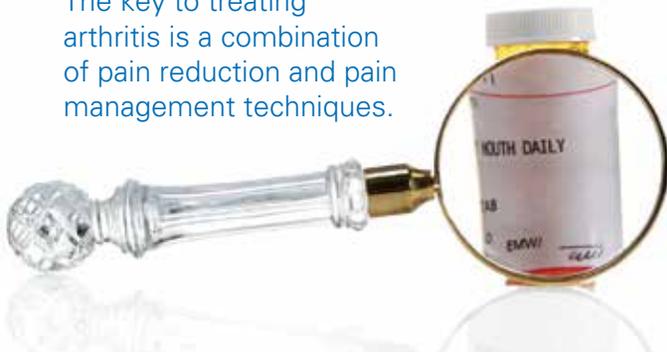
What is Arthritis?

The word arthritis comes from “arth” meaning joint and “itis” meaning inflammation, so it literally means joint inflammation. However, arthritis is much more complex than that and consists of over 100 different conditions from mild tendinitis to crippling rheumatoid arthritis and juvenile arthritis in children. What these diseases have in common is they cause pain, stiffness and swelling in the joints and sometimes in other parts of the body. Although the actual cause of arthritis is unknown, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis have been identified as the most frequently diagnosed forms of the disease.

Osteoarthritis (OA) - This is the most common form of arthritis and affects about 10% of Canadians mostly over the age of 70. OA is often considered a wear and tear form of arthritis because it can happen as people age and the cartilage that protects the bone ends of their joints degenerates. However, it is more complex than that and can also occur due to injury or stress to a particular area of the body. Most commonly, it occurs in the hip, knee, spine or other weight-bearing joints but can also affect the fingers and non-weight bearing joints.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) - This form of arthritis can strike at any age and is known to affect one in every 100 Canadians. It can strike quickly and often occurs between the ages of 25 and 50. It affects women up to three times more often than men.

The key to treating arthritis is a combination of pain reduction and pain management techniques.



RA occurs when a person’s own immune system attacks the cells of their joints and other internal organs and eventually the cartilage of the bone. The muscles, ligaments and tendons around the joint become weak and disabled, which can lead to permanent disability and deformity. The severity of the disease varies with each individual.

Who is at risk of getting arthritis?

Although arthritis can affect anyone at any age, there are some factors that may increase your risk of developing the disease.

- Age - It is said that if you live long enough, you will develop some form of arthritis, likely a touch of osteoarthritis. Persons over the age of 45 are at a higher risk.
- Gender - In general females are more likely to develop arthritis.
- Heredity - Some genes are known to carry a tendency to develop defective cartilage or joint deformities.
- Joint alignment - People with bowed legs, dislocated hips or double-jointedness risk developing osteoarthritis in those areas.
- Joint injury or overuse - Traumatic injuries or overuse caused by physical labour or sports increases the risk of osteoarthritis.
- Overweight - Being overweight during midlife or in later years increases risk due to stress on weight bearing joints.

What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Everyone experiences aches and pains at different times and some people with osteoarthritis experience no pain at all. The most common symptoms of osteoarthritis can include:

- Steady or intermittent pain in a joint
- Stiffness after periods of inactivity
- Swelling or tenderness in one or more joints
- Crunching feeling or sound when a joint is used
- Difficulty moving, bending or walking

Rheumatoid arthritis can strike very quickly and will often have similar symptoms as osteoarthritis but is accompanied by other warning signs. Rheumatoid arthritis symptoms can include:

- Swollen painful joints that feel warm
- Symmetrical inflammation - meaning the same joints on both sides of the body are affected
- Pain and stiffness that is worse in the morning and after inactive periods
- Weakness and fatigue
- Fever
- Weight loss

Because of the severity of RA, early diagnosis is important.

How is arthritis treated?

At present, there is no cure for arthritis. Therefore, the key to treating arthritis is pain reduction and pain management. The important thing to understand is that relief does not mean the complete absence of pain and no single strategy will provide all your pain relief. Successful pain management is a combination of many different techniques as discussed below.

Education - Get to know what treatment strategies are available. Actively work with your health care providers to discover which combination is effective for you. The more you know the more successful your pain management routine will be. You can learn to self manage your pain and thus take control of your disease and your life.

Medication - There are many medications used to treat arthritis. They vary considerably depending on the type of arthritis you have and the severity of the symptoms. Your doctor will prescribe the best medication for your individual needs. It is important to take the medication as prescribed. Skipping doses or changing the schedule can affect results. Remember, medication alone will not allow you to control your arthritis.