



Joint Health and the Prevention and Management of Arthritis

If you feel stiff and achy and your joints hurt, you may have some type of arthritis. According to the Arthritis Foundation, 46 million Americans have some form of arthritis. Osteoarthritis or OA, is one of the oldest and most common forms of arthritis, with some 27 million Americans living with it. Often known as the "wear and tear" kind of arthritis, osteoarthritis is a chronic condition characterized by the breakdown of the joint's cartilage. It most commonly occurs in the weight-bearing joints of the hips, knees and lower back and may also affect the neck, small finger joints, the base of the thumb and the big toe. Osteoarthritis rarely affects other joints except when injury or stress is involved.

Osteoarthritis usually develops gradually. It may start out as soreness or stiffness that is a nuisance and doesn't interfere with day-to-day activities. For other people, osteoarthritis interferes with everyday life due to pain and stiffness that may make it difficult to walk, climb stairs, work or sleep.

If you suspect you may have some form of arthritis, consult with your doctor or health care provider for a diagnosis. It is important to take an active role in your treatment, develop a self-management plan and prevent additional joint damage. While no definitive cause has been discovered, several contributing factors have been identified, including age, obesity, injury, overuse and genetics. Knowing and controlling these risk factors can help you minimize your risk or prevent the development of osteoarthritis and other forms of arthritis altogether.

Move More and Often

When it comes to moving, the goal is to do it on a regular basis. It's important to have a well-rounded, regular exercise program for several reasons. Aerobic exercise helps to keep your weight down to reduce the impact and pressure on joints. Resistance exercise helps to strengthen the muscles around certain joints. Flexibility exercises help to increase or maintain range of motion. You may wish to rest periodically and avoid high impact and repetitive movement forms of exercise.

- **AEROBIC EXERCISE** helps boost metabolism, improves mood, decreases inflammation and increases energy and stamina. Try low or no-impact exercises, such as aquatics, water walking, walking, swimming, elliptical training and cycling.
- **STRENGTH TRAINING** makes your joints more stable and strong muscles keep your bones positioned properly. It also increases bone density and decreases your risk for osteoporosis and fractures. Try dumbbells, light resistance bands or tubing.
- **FLEXIBILITY EXERCISE AND DAILY STRETCHING** decreases daily joint stiffness, improves range of motion and minimizes muscle soreness after exercise. Try yoga and tai chi and other gentle stretches.

Always consult your doctor or health care provider before beginning an exercise program.



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Say “Yes” to Good Foods

Eating a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy body weight are equally important for everyone regardless of their health condition. You can start eating healthier by following a few basic principles: eat a variety of foods, eat regular meals, and eat relatively the same amount of food at each meal. According to the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, a healthy diet for arthritis prevention and management is one with plenty of fruit, vegetables, lean protein, fluids and whole grains. Foods to say “Yes!” to include:

- **FRUITS AND VEGETABLES** contain antioxidants and fiber, which have been shown to decrease inflammation enzymes that trigger arthritis symptoms. Try to eat five or more servings per day.
- **OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS** have the potential to reduce joint pain and shorten the duration of morning stiffness. Try to add Omega-3 fatty acids, including salmon, trout, halibut, tuna, walnuts and flaxseed, to your diet regularly.
- **PLANT-BASED PROTEINS** may help to relieve inflammation when substituted for meat proteins, according to the *Arthritis Foundation*. Try lentils, chick peas, soy beans, soymilk, yogurt, milk and nuts and eat more vegetarian meals to increase your intake of plant-based proteins.

Strive to Stress Less

Chronic stress is a known trigger for pain, sleep disturbances, headaches and fatigue. It can also make you more prone to illness, accidents, increased inflammation in the body and more.

Yoga and Tai Chi can serve the dual role of improving flexibility and helping you relax. Other forms of relaxation, such as progressive muscle relaxation, help to relax the muscles, making them less tense and easier and less painful to move. Relaxation exercises also help you sleep better and feel more refreshed. Try to stress less by walking during lunch, writing in a journal, enjoying a hobby or meditating.

Check out our online chronic pain management program, **HealthMedia® CARE™ FOR PAIN**, to find ways to manage pain and gain a sense of control of your pain. To enroll, go to www.highmarkbcbs.com and log on to your Member Web site. Click on “Your Health,” followed by “Improve Your Health.”

Be an Arthritis Self-Manager

Arthritis, like diabetes and other chronic diseases, needs to be managed. By learning self-management skills, you can learn to live well with arthritis. Self-management is a day-to-day job, especially if you are experiencing chronic pain.

There's no one best way to manage arthritis pain. Often you need a combination of methods. The top three methods focus on heat, cold and rest. Speak with your doctor or health care provider for specific advice. Ask about alternative therapies, such as acupuncture, massage, ultrasound and biofeedback.

Take advantage of **COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE WELLNESS DISCOUNTS** offered by your health care company. Log onto your Member Web site, then click on “Your Coverage,” followed by “Member Discounts.” Search the nationwide network for over 35,000 practitioners and centers who offer up to a 30% discount on services, such as massage, acupuncture, chiropractic, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Pilates, yoga and many more.

For more information on arthritis and self-management, visit the Arthritis Foundation Web site at www.arthritis.org and www.arthritistoday.org.