

The Facts About Arthritis and How to Live a Quality Life with the Disease

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If you are suffering from chronic joint pain and stiffness, you aren't alone – arthritis is one of the most common diseases in the U.S., affecting 50 million people (one in every five adults). While it is frequently assumed to be a disease impacting the elderly, two-thirds of people with arthritis are younger than 65, including 300,000 children. By 2030, an estimated 67 million Americans age 18 and older are projected to have physician-diagnosed arthritis. Every year, the disease results in 21 million people limited in their activities, an estimated 44 million outpatient visits, 992,100 hospitalizations, and 9,367 deaths.

Possible signs of arthritis

- Ongoing joint pain
- Joint swelling and/or stiffness
- Tenderness or pain when touching a joint
- Problems using or moving a joint normally
- Warmth and redness in a joint

Major types of arthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is one of the most common forms of arthritis, affecting about 27 million people in the U.S. It is a chronic condition in which cartilage (the material that cushions the joints) breaks down. Symptoms specific to OA include sore or stiff joints in the hips, knees, and lower back after inactivity or overuse; stiffness after resting that goes away after moving; and pain that is worse after activity or toward the end of the day. Common risk factors include increasing age, obesity, previous joint injury, overuse of the joint, weak thigh muscles, and genetics.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an incurable, progressive disease in which the body's immune system attacks the joints, causing inflammation and damage. About 1.3 million people have RA. It is three times more prevalent in women than men, and most commonly affects people ages 40 to 60. RA can affect the blood vessels and muscle of the heart, so people with the condition are at a greater risk for heart attacks and heart failure. There are additional potential [serious side effects](#) that are specific to RA that are not present with any other forms of arthritis. Although there is no cure for RA, there are multiple ways to effectively manage the condition and improve your quality of life. You have likely heard the current TV commercials touting drugs like Humira and Orencia, just two of the drugs prescribed to help manage symptoms.

Gout is a form of inflammatory arthritis that causes sudden, severe pain, swelling and tenderness – most often in the large joint of the big toe. It can also affect feet, ankles, knees, hands, wrists, elbows and less frequently, soft tissue and tendons. Genetics, gender, alcoholism, and obesity play key roles in the development of gout, which is caused by the build-up of too much uric acid. About 6.1 million Americans have experienced at least one gout attack. The disease most commonly affects people 30 and older and is more prevalent in men than women.

Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) is a type of chronic inflammatory arthritis associated with the chronic skin condition psoriasis. Psoriasis, which affects about 7.5 million Americans, most often causes patches of thick, reddened, irritated skin with flaky, silver-white patches called scales. Psoriatic arthritis appears about 10 years after the onset of psoriasis, which is typically diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 35. In addition to common arthritis symptoms, people with this form of the disease may experience tenderness where muscles or ligaments attach to bones, particularly the heel and bottom of the foot; pitted or infected-looking nails; morning stiffness; general fatigue; reduced range of motion; and redness and pain in tissues surrounding the eyes (conjunctivitis). Golfer Phil Mickelson has brought greater awareness to this disease and is a paid spokesperson for Enbrel, one of the drugs prescribed to treat psoriatic arthritis.

Medications

There are many over-the-counter and prescription medications available to treat the various forms of arthritis. It is very important to talk to your doctor before taking any medications – even over-the-counter drugs like acetaminophen, naproxen, and ibuprofen can have side effects. If over-the-counter medications are ineffective, your doctor may prescribe several different types of prescription medication.

Steroids are generally quite helpful, but have a lot of side effects. Doctors try to avoid these problems by injecting the steroid into the affected joint or trying other medications in combination to keep the dose of steroids as low as possible.

Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) work by interfering with or suppressing the immune system that attacks the joints in people with inflammatory arthritis such as RA or psoriatic. Aggressive treatment of arthritis often involves using one or more DMARDs, sometimes in combination with an over-the-counter medication.

Exercise

It is a misconception that people with arthritis should avoid exercise – on the contrary, inactivity can lead to more pain in many instances. The key is to find exercises that help ease the pain. A therapeutic exercise program is often a necessary first step for individuals who have been inactive, have restricted joint motion or muscle strength, are experiencing joint pain, or are recovering from surgery such as a joint replacement. A tailored program that includes a balance of range-of-motion, strengthening, and endurance exercises can help relieve the symptoms of arthritis and protect joints from further damage. Many people with arthritis find that pool aerobics or fitness classes are ideal because the water is gentle on painful joints. Check with your local park district or senior center to see if they offer programs geared towards people with arthritis.

Diet and Lifestyle Modifications

There is a lot of information about diet and arthritis based on foods that can increase/decrease inflammation, but little conclusive scientific evidence to support these claims. Eating more green

leafy vegetables provides extra vitamin K, which some studies have shown to be beneficial for people with osteoarthritis. Research has shown that consuming Omega 3, found in oily fish and some eggs, as well as cutting down on saturated fats and processed meat can help with osteoarthritis. The best approach is to listen to your body and keep a food diary – avoid foods that cause symptoms to worsen and eat foods that appear to lessen the severity of symptoms. One lifestyle factor that is controllable is maintaining a healthy weight – extra weight is a proven risk factor for osteoarthritis.

Many people with arthritis experience fatigue and pain caused by repetitive activities. If you are working at a computer all day, you may need to take more breaks and purchase assistive devices that help, such as a special mouse and wrist pads. There are a variety of products on the market made for people with arthritis that can ease pain and make life easier. These include special braces, bed pillows, kitchen gadgets, and more – targeted specifically to easing the stress on affected joints.

The [Arthritis Foundation](#) has more detailed information on all of these issues.

Sources: Arthritis Foundation, CDC, Chicago Tribune, WebMD