



# Senior Series

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## Living with Arthritis

Did you know that arthritis and chronic joint symptoms are the leading cause of disability among Americans age 15 and over? Seventy million Americans (one in every three adults) are estimated to have some type of joint pain. Arthritis interferes with the everyday activities of over seven million Americans, making it difficult for them to walk, dress, or bathe themselves. Although there are several forms of arthritis, three types are the most common.

**Osteoarthritis** is the most common form of arthritis for adults over age 40. It is known as "wear and tear" arthritis. There are many names for osteoarthritis including degenerative joint disease, ostoarthritis, hypertrophic arthritis, and degenerative arthritis. Symptoms include pain, swelling, and limited movement. Osteoarthritis can affect

a single joint and most often targets the weight-bearing joints such as the knees, hips, and lower back. As the articular cartilage that cushions the joint breaks down, uneven surfaces develop, causing pain and swelling. Once the deterioration causes bone to rub against bone, surgery may be an option. Your medical specialist will provide you with the best options for your condition.

**Rheumatoid arthritis** is one of the most disabling types of arthritis, afflicting more than two million Americans. Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disorder, a condition in which the body attacks itself. There are many similarities to osteoarthritis; however, rheumatoid arthritis can occur at any age. More than 60 percent of people with rheumatoid arthritis are women. It most often affects the wrists, ankles, knees, and

toes. Rheumatoid arthritis causes the joints to become inflamed, stiff, and painful to move. If not treated, joints may become deformed and loss of movement may occur. New drug treatments and exercise are helping people to live healthier lives.

**Gout arthritis** most often occurs in older men. Uric acid is a product of cell breakdown in the body. At extra high levels, uric acid can crystallize in and around small joints, especially the joint of the big toe. Gout is treated with two kinds of drugs: one to reduce the inflammation caused by uric acid crystals and the other to reduce the uric acid level itself. Gout is controllable and does not need to lead to long-term effects. Contact your medical specialist for the most current options available.

### What Are Some Treatments?

There are several treatments offered when dealing with arthritis. Not every treatment is suitable for each person. Always discuss treatments thoroughly with your doctor.

- Cortisone injections in the early stages of arthritis.
- Braces used to straighten the joint.
- Orthotics to affect and correct the alignment of the joint.
- Weight reduction to relieve the stress on the joint.

- Surgery: joint replacement or reconstruction of a joint.
- Fusion to remove a joint, primarily fingers or ankles.
- Exercise to keep muscles strong to support and protect joints.
- Anti-inflammatory medications.

### How Can You Cope?

- Lose weight, if recommended.
- Exercise daily with gentle stretching and relaxation. Strengthening (resistance) and cardiovascular (aerobic) exercises are helpful for most people. Check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.
- Pace yourself, rest, and understand your limitations.
- Be aware of how a joint moves, and carefully monitor any twisting motions.
- Don't remain in the same position for long periods of time.
- If lifting or pushing, distribute the weight to as many joints as possible. For example, use both arms to lift a package.
- Use warm and cold treatments such as ice packs or heating pads as recommended.
- Try a muscle ointment to alleviate morning stiffness.
- Utilize your library, hospital, and outreach programs for current

information regarding arthritis and treatments.

- Be realistic and optimistic.
- Learn effective ways to manage pain by recording activities that cause excessive discomfort.

Living with arthritis can be frustrating and difficult. If you are willing to work at it, taking control of arthritis is within your reach. It is imperative that you play a critical role in the management of your condition. Consult your doctor if you have any questions about arthritis or its treatments.

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