



HOME > DISEASES > SELF TREATMENT > HOW TO CARE FOR YOURSELF

HOW TO CARE FOR YOURSELF

Think there's nothing you can do about arthritis? Great news! You can act right now. Some of the ideas here are simple, one-time actions. Others are first steps toward longer-term goals. All can directly or indirectly improve your health, outlook or pain level, and can generally make life with arthritis a little easier.

- **Pay attention to symptoms, see your doctor and get an accurate diagnosis**

If you have pain, stiffness or swelling in or around a joint for more than two weeks, it's time to see your doctor. These symptoms can develop suddenly or slowly. Only a doctor can tell if it's arthritis. But "you have arthritis" is not a diagnosis. Ask for a specific diagnosis of the type of arthritis you have. There are more than 100 types – including [osteoarthritis](#) (the most common type of arthritis) and [rheumatoid arthritis](#) – each of which has different treatments. Getting the right treatment requires getting the right diagnosis.

As part of the diagnosis process, you may be asked by your doctor to take various lab tests such as antinuclear antibody tests, joint fluid tests or erythrocyte sedimentation tests. Each of these procedures helps your doctor or rheumatologist find out how your arthritis has progressed. Find out more about each with the [Lab Test Guide](#).

- **Start early**

The earlier an accurate diagnosis is made and treatment started, the better. Early treatment can often mean less joint damage and less pain. With rheumatoid arthritis, for example, some rheumatologists push for [early arthritis treatment](#), debating if *when* you treat RA is as important as how you treat it. Your doctor may recommend a combination of treatments that may include [medication](#), [weight management](#), [exercise](#), [use of heat or cold](#), and methods to protect your joints from further damage. See your doctor for an early diagnosis and immediate treatment plan!

- **Protect your joints**

Avoid excess stress on your joints. Use larger or stronger joints to carry things. [Assistive devices](#) can make tasks at home and work easier. Look for them in the kitchen (rubber jar openers, reachers), bedroom (zipper pulls, buttoning aids), bathroom (tub bars, handrails) and for other areas of your life. Look for products with the [Arthritis Foundation's Ease-of-Use Commendation](#). These are items that are comfortable, easy-to-use or have user-friendly packaging.

In addition, staying close to your recommended weight also helps relieve damaging pressure on hips and knees. For every pound of extra weight you lose, that's four pounds less pressure off each knee. Start by [cutting calories](#) and focusing on a healthy, well-rounded diet.

- **Get moving**

Exercise helps lessen pain, increases range of movement, reduces fatigue and helps you feel better overall. A [well-rounded workout routine](#) for people with arthritis includes [flexibility exercises](#) to increase range of motion, aerobic exercises to improve endurance and decrease fatigue, and strengthening exercises to improve muscle fitness.

Your doctor, a physical therapist, or other specially trained health professionals can show you range-of-motion exercises and strengthening exercises that are good for arthritis. The [Arthritis Foundation](#) also offers general exercise, aquatic, Tai Chi and walking programs. Contact your [local office](#) for details.

The key is to have a regular exercise program. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that adults do a minimum of 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (brisk walking, gardening) a week or 1 hour and 15 minutes each week of vigorous aerobic physical activity (jogging, aerobic dancing). Whether your activity is moderate or vigorous, the goal is to keep moving. Set some exercise goals and track them with the *Let's Move Together* [movement tracker](#) or [listen to a podcast](#) and psyche yourself up to move.

- **Tune in**

Listening to your favorite music can lighten your mood and may even help you to forget your pain – at least for a little while. Research has found that [listening to classical music](#) can actually ease arthritis pain. The study found that listening to music for an hour every day can reduce pain, depression, and other symptoms associated with chronic pain. So make a tape of your favorite tunes and listen to it when you need a lift.

- **Pick, pour or peel**

If you are looking for a tasty healthy treat, reach for an orange – or a tall glass of orange juice. Why? Recent research has shown the importance of [vitamin C](#) and other antioxidants in reducing the risk of osteoarthritis and its progression. People whose diets contained the least amount of vitamin C were three times more likely to be diagnosed with arthritis than those who ate the most fruits and vegetables rich in the vitamin. (The USDA recommends 75 mg of vitamin C daily for women and 90 mg per day for men.)

Another bonus: oranges and other citrus fruits are good sources of [folic acid](#), which can help alleviate the side effects of the arthritis drug methotrexate and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease in women who have lupus.

- **Check out your options**

In the past two years, the FDA has approved several drugs for rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis and other arthritis-related diseases. If your current medication isn't working as well as you'd like – or if it's causing unacceptable side effects – ask your doctor about these new treatment options. Check out the online [drug guide](#) and [supplement guide](#).

Before you give up on your medications, however, see if your [side effects may be manageable](#) with lower dosages or a change in how the meds are taken. See your doctor for advice.

- **Let yourself go**

On vacation, that is. Make yours a good one by remembering to bring extra medication, a spare prescription, insurance card, comfortable shoes, your doctor's phone number and, of course, your camera.

Taking a break from a daily routine can be a good time to start a new routine that involves fitness and nutrition. Try getting in the habit of moving every day when you're on vacation – whether it's a walk on the beach or a non-strenuous hike in the woods. If you get used to exercising on vacation, hopefully that routine will carry over when you get back home.

- **Face facts.**

Learn something new about arthritis. Building an understanding of your disease is an important step in managing it. Knowledge, after all, is power. Start by ordering some of our [free brochures](#) about various conditions, treatments and medications, fitness and nutrition, and other arthritis-related helpful guides. Visit the [online arthritis community](#) for information from people who know about the ups and downs of living with arthritis.

- **Play in the dirt**

Buy the seeds for three of your favorite veggies or flowers and plant a garden. Digging in the dirt can be therapeutic for sore hands and can yield beautiful and fragrant – or delicious and nutritious – results. When working in the garden, be sure to use [arthritis-friendly garden tools](#) that will help prevent too much reaching, carrying and bending. If your arthritis is too painful for traditional gardening, check out [enabling gardening](#), a unique approach to gardening where you keep your plants off the ground and within easy reach.

- **Have a good laugh**

Read a book of jokes, rent a funny movie or watch your favorite sit-com or stand-up comedian. Laughing – even when you feel like crying from agony – can relax muscles, reduce stress, relieve pain and even boost your immune system. Take your giggles a step farther and try [laughter yoga](#), a way to mix a workout with laughter therapy.

- **Play it safe in the sun**

Protect yourself when you go out into the sun — wear sunglasses, a hat and sun screen. Some forms of arthritis, as well as certain medications, can leave you more vulnerable to the sun's harmful rays. People with lupus, for example, should be covered up completely when they're out in the sun because exposure to rays can trigger painful flares. If you're taking [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs \(NSAIDs\)](#), you could develop a temporary increased sensitivity to sunlight. In addition, medical conditions such as dermatomyositis, scleroderma and vitiligo are also autoimmune diseases that are sun-sensitive. The best solution is to wear a sunblock with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 30 or 45 every time you go outdoors. Make sure the lotion or spray you choose blocks both UVA and UVB rays and reapply frequently.

- **Do Tell**

Take an opportunity to tell someone — co-worker, friend, and family member — about arthritis. Start with an interesting fact: Did you know that arthritis affects 46 million people? Then go from there. They'll understand you – and the way arthritis affects your life – a little better. Or share your feelings with others who have arthritis on the [Arthritis Foundation's message boards](#). For advice on how to broach the subject, read "[Telling People You Have Arthritis](#)."

- **Resolve to reduce**

Lose weight. You won't just look better, you'll feel better, too. Why? Every extra pound you carry around translates to added stress to your knees and hips. Excess weight can mean more pain, no matter which form of arthritis you have. It can also contribute to and aggravate osteoarthritis, while increasing your risk of gout. Learn more in the [Exercise Center](#) and get tips from the [Weight Loss Guide](#).

- **Bone up**

Stock up on your favorite source of [calcium](#). A diet rich in this important mineral can help decrease your risk of osteoporosis. In addition, inflammatory arthritis conditions accelerate bone loss, so getting the optimum calcium intake is critical. Recommended daily doses of calcium are 1,000 mg for adults 50 and younger and 1,200 mg for adults over 50. If you don't like drinking milk – or want some variety – try consuming more milk products, such as yogurt, cheese and ice cream. Or add powdered milk to puddings, gravies, shakes and other recipes. Other good sources of calcium: broccoli, salmon (with the bones) and kale.

- **Do drugs – the right way**

Take your medication just as your doctor prescribes. If you're tempted to stop because you feel it's not working or you believe it's causing side effects, call your doctor first. It can take weeks – or even months – for the full benefits of a medication to become apparent, and some side effects ease over time. Stopping a medication abruptly may not only cause you to miss out on its benefits – in some cases it can be downright dangerous. Get more information on dosages, side effects, interactions and more with the [Drug Guide](#).

- **Begin with breakfast**

Put up the pastry and grab some fruit, fiber (like oatmeal) and a tall glass of water instead of coffee. Like you've always heard, a [healthful breakfast](#) is a great way to start the day. Without it, the bad results can range from higher cholesterol, lower energy and overeating throughout the day. Check out these [four quick breakfast ideas](#) and order our [free brochure](#) on diet and arthritis can tell you more about healthier eating.

- **Try this on for size**

It's time to toss those fashionable, yet oh, so uncomfortable pumps that cramp your toes, rub your heels and squeeze your bunions. A well padded, well fitting shoe with plenty of room for your toes – and their imperfections – can make a world of difference in the way your feet (and the rest of you) feel. Check out these [strategies for walking success](#) before you hit the sidewalks and trails.

- **Take a hike**

Choose your favorite spots (indoors and out) and make plans to walk them at least once a week. [Walking](#) is the ideal exercise for most people with arthritis. It burns calories, strengthens muscles and builds denser bones – all without jarring fragile joints. Want to know more about walking as exercise? Try our [Walk with Ease program](#). Contact your [local Arthritis Foundation chapter](#) for details.

- **Sit, soak and soothe**

A warm bath before bed can relieve muscle tension, ease aching joints and help you get a good night's sleep. Try our [free brochure](#) on ways to manage your pain for more ideas. Read other [warming techniques](#) to relieve arthritis pain.

- **Treat your muscles**

Find a certified massage therapist and treat yourself to a good rub down. The benefits vary from person to person but may include decreased pain and stiffness associated with arthritis, increased circulation, energy and flexibility, eased muscle spasms and an improvement in the body's sleep and immune functions. Mentally, massage can also decrease stress and depression. Besides, it just feels good. Be sure to find a massage therapist who is skilled working with people with arthritis, as some elements of massages may not be appropriate for you.

- **Work smarter**

Do something that will make your job easier — check into working flex hours, telecommuting or working part-time. No matter where or when you work, take frequent breaks to stretch stiff joints and sore muscles. Flexible work arrangements aren't only good for you, they can be good for your employer. Researchers found that companies that allow flexible work arrangements experience less turnover, greater development and reduced cost. Here are tips for [approaching your employer about flexible work arrangements](#). Order the "[Arthritis in the Workplace](#)" brochure for more insights.

- **Fess up**

Be sure to tell your doctor about the medications you're taking, both prescription and over the counter. Don't forget to mention any nutritional supplements you're taking, too. All medications – even natural ones – have the potential to cause side effects or to react adversely with each other. If you don't feel comfortable with your doctor or rheumatologist, then maybe you should think about finding a new one. The doctor-patient relationship is an important one, so it's critical that you have an open, comfortable communication. Get tips on [finding a doctor](#) you can trust.

- **Write away**

Keeping a journal is fun and therapeutic. Best of all, there are no rules. Write about your feelings, fears, frustrations and fun times. Write about things you'd never tell another living soul. Write about anything – or nothing in particular. Just write.

- **Stretch your legs**

Stretching is a simple way to keep joints and muscles flexible. It relieves stress and can help enable you to maintain your daily activities. Try this to keep your calf muscles strong and flexible: Stand two feet from a wall, with your toes pointed inward palms against the wall. Keeping your knees straight and feet flat, lean forward onto your hands without bending at the waist. Feel your calf muscles pull and extend. Hold this position for 10 seconds, then gently push away from the wall. Repeat. Watch these [exercise videos](#) for simple stretching exercises you can do at home.

- **Take the plunge**

Exercising in the water can build strength and increase range of motion, while the water's buoyancy reduces wear and tear on sore joints. There are many aquatic programs and exercises that are great for people with arthritis. Try [water walking](#), for example. Water provides 12 times the resistance of air, so you're getting a great workout without the wear and tear on your joints. [Aquatic treadmills](#) are a unique way to get a water workout. These underwater treadmills are great for therapeutic or everyday use. So, get splashing! Check the local YMCA or [call your local Arthritis Foundation office](#) for an aquatic exercise program in your area.

- **Make a pack**

When joints are hot and inflamed, applying something cold can decrease pain and swelling by constricting blood vessels and preventing fluids from leaking into surrounding tissues. Our favorite ice pack: a bag of frozen peas or corn that can be molded to the shape of your body. Get more ideas in our free brochure on [managing your pain](#).

- **Kick butt**

If only for a day, and then another ... and another. Smoking can increase your risk of complications from lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. It can increase your risk of developing psoriasis and can predispose you to osteoporosis. Also, if you have to undergo joint surgery, smoking can prolong your recovery. Arthritis drugs can also be [less effective for smokers](#) and smoking can contribute to [sleep problems](#).

- **Open your heart**

Select a group that holds a special place in your heart — the elderly, the homeless, animals — and volunteer with an organization that helps them. Or raise money for a cause you believe in. Helping others can be a great way to help you forget your own problems – or at least put them into perspective.

- **Enjoy Your Exercise**

Take the work out of working out. Sign up for a class that makes exercise fun – country line dancing, ballroom dancing, swimming, yoga or tai chi. Some have specific benefits for people with arthritis. [Tai chi](#), for example, specifically reduces the pain and impairment for people with severe knee osteoarthritis. The slow, graceful exercise – originally a Chinese martial art – also reduces stress and can improve balance. [Yoga](#) strengthens and relaxes muscles stiff from arthritis, as well as helps with weight loss programs. The [Arthritis Foundation](#) offers general exercise, aquatic, tai chi and walking programs. Contact your [local office](#) for details.

- **Play 20 questions**

Well, maybe not 20, but write down questions about your condition or your medications as you think of them. Prioritize them and slip them into your purse or wallet before your next doctor's visit. When you see the doctor, you'll have your top concerns at your fingertips. Americans get, on average, 18 minutes with their doctors each visit. Make the most of that visit by knowing what questions you want answered. Here's [advice](#) on using that time to get the care you need.

- **Appeal to a higher power**

No one knows exactly how, but research is showing that spiritual belief and prayer can help people feel better physically and emotionally. Studies suggests that the interactions of the mind, body and spirit can have powerful effects on our health, and polls have shown that prayer is one of the most commonly used alternative therapies for arthritis. Although few published scientific studies have examined the effects of prayer and spirituality, adding a spiritual component to your life couldn't hurt, as long as you don't abandon other treatment plans.

- **Turn the other cheek**

Looking good helps you feel good. If an arthritis-related condition or its treatment has caused a rash on or tightening or swelling of your face, check at the cosmetics counter of your local department store for tips or special products to camouflage these problems and give your cheeks a healthy looking glow.

Want to know more? [Visit the Arthritis Store](#) to order free brochures, books, videos and many other useful products.

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