



**www.arthritis.org**  
**800-283-7800**

# Managing Your Activities

## UNDERSTANDING ARTHRITIS

The word arthritis literally means joint inflammation (“arth” = joint; “itis” = inflammation). There are more than 100 forms of arthritis and related diseases that affect the areas in and around joints, including muscles and tendons. Some of these forms of arthritis also can affect other parts of the body, including the skin, eyes and internal organs.

Arthritis can cause stiffness, pain, swelling and deformities of joints. The severity and limitations caused by arthritis vary from person to person, and even from day to day. In some people, only a few joints are affected. In others, the entire body may be affected. Arthritis can affect people of any age, including children.

Nearly 70 million Americans have a form of arthritis or a related condition. Arthritis brings many challenges, but you can still lead a fulfilling life.

## WHY MOVING HURTS

When you don’t move a joint regularly, it can stiffen and the muscles around it may weaken and tighten. When you try to move, you may have pain.

Pain may be caused by inflammation, swelling, joint damage, muscle tightness or spasms, or joint deformities that cause strain to muscles or tendons. Muscles may hurt after you exercise or do activities you aren’t used to. Sometimes when the joint is inflamed or damaged, even simple activities stress the joint.

When your joints are inflamed or damaged, you need to take certain precautions with your daily activities to avoid further joint damage. Your doctor, physical therapist or occupational therapist can teach you helpful exercises and ways to use wraps, splints, heat and cold to decrease pain. Electrical devices may help with pain relief as well. You also can learn easy ways to move that put less stress on your joints. It is important to lessen the stress on your joints during daily activities so that you don’t aggravate your arthritis or damage your joints.

## USE YOUR BODY WISELY

Using your body wisely means protecting your joints and saving energy. Techniques include doing daily activities in ways that put less stress on your joints. The tips on the following pages will help reduce your pain.

**1. Check your posture.** Poor posture can increase your pain and make you tired. Using good posture protects your neck, back, hips and knees. Practicing good posture means putting your body in the most efficient and least stressful position.

### *Joint Protection Principles*

- Respect pain.
- Avoid stressful positions.
- Change positions frequently.
- Use your largest, strongest joints and muscles for a task.
- Keep your muscles strong and your joints flexible.
- Use splints and helpful devices if necessary.
- Use brief rest periods to reduce overuse.
- Get assistance from another individual if a task is difficult.
- Pace yourself.

### **Standing**

To stand correctly, imagine that a straight line connects your ears, shoulders, hips, knees and heels. Stand with your feet slightly apart or with one foot in front of the other to keep your balance. Do not lock your knees, but rather bend them slightly. Tighten your stomach muscles and tuck your buttocks under. Hold your shoulders back and tuck your chin in a comfortable position.

Standing this way will help prevent pain. If standing for long periods becomes painful, lean against a wall or put your foot up on a stool, which will flatten your lower back and prevent slouching.



FIGURE 1

The figure in the center shows correct standing posture, while those on either side are examples of incorrect posture.

### **Sitting**

Your spine should be stable and supported when you sit, and your feet should touch the ground or footrest. You may want to place a pillow or a rolled-up towel behind your lower back for support. Keep your hips, knees and ankles at a 90-degree angle. Keep your shoulders back, and tuck your chin in a comfortable position.

Relax your shoulders with your arms at your sides. Keep your elbows at a 90-degree angle or lower. Your wrists should be straight or slightly bent upward. When working at a desk or counter, you may need to use an adjustable



FIGURE 2

The figure above shows proper posture for sitting.

chair to position your joints properly. Sit in a higher chair if you have trouble standing up and sitting down because of pain or weakness in your knees, hips, thighs or lower back. When reading, use a bookstand to prevent neck strain from bending your neck forward.

### Lying Down

When lying on your back, use a cervical (neck) pillow or a small rolled-up towel instead of a regular pillow to avoid stressing your neck or neck muscles. Don't use pillows under your knees because they can lead to contractures of your knees so that you won't be able to straighten them out.

When lying on your side, place several pillows around your body and one between your knees, or use a large body pillow to support your arms and legs.

**2. Handle heavy loads.** To make heavy loads easier to handle, use your largest, strongest joints and muscles to take stress off smaller hand joints and to spread the load over larger surface areas.

When you lift or carry items, use the palms of both hands (with your fingers straight) rather than grip with your fingers; use your arms instead of your hands. Hold items close to your body, which is less stressful for your joints. Slide objects whenever possible rather than lift them.

Lead with your stronger leg when going up stairs and lead with your weaker leg when going down. Always use a handrail if possible to prevent falls.

**3. Change positions often.** Keeping muscles and joints in the same position adds to stiffness and pain. Try to get up and move every 15 to 20 minutes when you are doing a sedentary activity, including reading, using a computer or playing the piano. Do a quick move-

### CORRECT



FIGURE 3

When picking up an object, bend and straighten with your knees instead of your back.

### INCORRECT



ment check of your jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists, fingers, hips, legs, ankles and toes. Stretch and relax areas that are tired or tight. Tight or tense muscles can increase joint pain.

**4. Control your weight.** Extra pounds put more stress on your hips, knees, lower back and feet. The extra stress can lead to further joint pain and damage. If you are overweight, ask your doctor for advice about a weight-loss and exercise program.

**5. Balance rest and activity.** Pace yourself during work and leisure activities by taking short breaks and alternating heavy and light activities throughout the day. Balance periods of work with rest breaks so you don't place stress on your joints or get too tired. You may need to take longer or more frequent rest breaks when your arthritis is more active.

**6. Get organized.** Organize your work and storage areas. Keep all equipment and tools within easy reach and at a comfortable level. Use a lazy Susan or plastic bins to keep items you need close by. In the kitchen, put items that are used often at counter height and use the upper and lower cupboards for items that are used less often.

**7. Listen to your body.** Pain is one of your body's signals that something is wrong. If your pain increases during or after activity or exercise, then you've overstressed your joints. If your pain lasts more than two hours after completing a task, do a little less or do the task in a different way. Stop an activity before you are fatigued or have increased pain. Set a timer if necessary to remind you to stop. Check with your doctor or therapist for ways to manage various types of pain.

**8. Use helpful devices.** In most cases, you should try to use your own range of motion and strength to perform tasks. But when you're tired, stiff or in pain, helpful devices can make tasks easier, more efficient and less stressful for your muscles and joints.

Many assistive devices can help you use your joints wisely and prevent further deformity. They also can help by providing additional strength, extending your reach, preventing strain and keeping your body in the best position for certain tasks. Ask your doctor, or physical or occupational therapist about helpful devices.

**9. Ask for help.** Getting help when you need it is important, especially for activities that cause pain, fatigue or put stress on your joints. Tell your family and friends that the amount of pain and stiffness you feel varies. Try to involve your family in decisions about sharing chores and making new arrangements in your home. Ask your friends for their understanding if you have to change or postpone plans you've made.

## HOW TO MAKE ACTIVITIES EASIER

There are many ways to conserve your energy and use your joints wisely. Some examples are listed on the following pages. There also are suggestions for self-help devices and adapted products. Remember to use your joints and muscles in the least stressful way before using these aids.

### *Finger Saving Tips*

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- Avoid activities that require a tight grip.
  - Avoid activities that put lots of direct pressure on your fingers or thumbs.
  - Avoid pinching, squeezing or twisting.
  - Use the palms of your hands with your fingers spread open.
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### *Kitchen Tips*

- Plan ahead to lessen last-minute tasks.
- Use electric appliances to get the job done efficiently with little stress on your joints.
- Place a mixing bowl in the sink while stirring. A damp cloth underneath will help keep it from slipping. Hold the mixing spoon like a dagger to take stress off your hands.
- Look for helpful kitchen tools that are easy to use and have large, comfortable grips, such as Good Grips. Use other adaptive devices such as jar openers, peelers and special knives.
- Use disposable baking pans, nonstick sprays and foil to simplify cleanup.
- Use a wheeled cart to move heavy items from place to place.
- Sit on a high stool while cooking or washing dishes.
- Use a small, soft-grip pair of needle-nose pliers to pull open small tabs and seals on jars.

- Kitchen renovation may offer substantial benefit with properly scaled counter height and open shelving at counter height.

### Housecleaning Tips

- Do one major cleaning task a day, such as washing clothes or cleaning the bathroom.
- Sit down to sort, fold and iron clothes.
- Use long-handled tools such as feather dusters, mops and brooms.
- Store cleaning supplies everywhere they are used.
- Use convenience products such as automatic toilet bowl cleaner, spray-on mildew remover and shower-cleaning spray to reduce scrubbing.

### Personal Care Tips

- Sit on a bath stool in the shower or tub.
- Wash with a bath mitt, bath puff or long-handled brush.
- Install lever faucet fixtures you can control with your palm.
- Install grab bars near the tub and toilet to help your balance.
- Use non-skid mats in the tub and shower.
- Use an elevated toilet seat to reduce stress on your knees.
- Extend or build up brush and comb handles by attaching rulers, foam rubber or pipe insulation tubing.
- Use an electric toothbrush or one with a built-up handle.
- Use a free-standing mirror to put on your makeup, so you don't have to lean over the sink and strain your back.

### Dressing Tips

- Wear loose-fitting clothes with large neck and arm holes.
- Use long-handled shoehorns and sock aids.
- Wear pre-tied neckties.

- Use a zipper pull or add a loop, chain or large paper clip to make a zipper easy to grasp.
- Use Velcro to fasten a garment to avoid buttoning and unbuttoning.

### Workplace Tips

- Sit in an adjustable chair.
- Keep files and supplies within easy reach.
- Use helpful devices such as paper holders, footrests, and wrist and arm rests.

### Using Joints the Right Way

TASK	DO	DON'T
Carrying objects	Use the palms of both hands.	Don't use your fingers.
Climbing stairs	Go up by leading with stronger leg; go down leading with weaker leg.	Don't put pressure on your weaker leg.
Lifting objects	Hold items close to your body.	Don't put pressure on your arms, hands or back.
Opening a jar	Use the palm of your hand or a jar opener.	Don't grasp or twist with your fingers.
Traveling	Divide travel items into two equal loads or use a suitcase with wheels.	Don't carry unequal loads.

### Leisure Activity Tips

- Wear comfortable walking shoes that fit well and provide support. Elastic shoelaces or Velcro closures make putting on shoes easier.
- Use a card holder to hold playing cards.
- Lay newspapers or books open on a table to read or use a bookstand.
- Use lightweight tools with built-up or extended handles for gardening and other yard work.

Many gardening tools are available with long handles to avoid having to bend over.

- Play nine holes of golf, then rest before starting the second set. Ride a golf cart and use lightweight clubs. Golf club handles can also be built up wider to make gripping easier.
- Develop a regular exercise routine of stretching, aerobics and strengthening.

### TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY

Using your affected muscles and joints wisely is important all the time, but it may take a while to feel natural. If you continue to find tasks too difficult, talk to your doctor or a physical or occupational therapist. A variety of techniques, aids and products can help.

### THE ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION

The mission of the Arthritis Foundation is to improve lives through leadership in the prevention, control and cure of arthritis and related diseases.

The Arthritis Foundation supports research with the greatest potential for advances and

has invested more than \$320 million in these efforts since its inception in 1948. Additionally, the Arthritis Foundation supports key public policy and advocacy efforts at a local and national level in order to make a difference on behalf of 70 million people living with arthritis.

As your partner in taking greater control of arthritis, the Arthritis Foundation also offers a large number of programs and services nationwide to make life with arthritis easier and less painful and to help you become an active partner in your own health care.

Contact us at (800) 283-7800 or visit us on the Web at [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org) to become an Arthritis Advocate or to find out how you can become involved.

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**For more information:** The Arthritis Foundation offers a wide variety of books, brochures and videos about different forms of arthritis, treatment and self-management techniques to help you take control of your arthritis. To order any of these products, become an Arthritis Foundation member or to subscribe to the Arthritis Foundation's award-winning consumer health magazine, *Arthritis Today*, call (800) 283-7800. Call or visit our Web site ([www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)) to find out how you can take control of your arthritis and start living better today!

This brochure has been reviewed by the  
AMERICAN COLLEGE OF RHEUMATOLOGY.



### MISSION STATEMENT:

The mission of the Arthritis Foundation is to improve lives through leadership in the prevention, control and cure of arthritis and related diseases.



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