Proper diet, exercise can help preventing disability from arthritis: a NetWellness column
by Dr. Raymond Hong/Case Western Reserve University and Dr. Stacy Ardoin/The Ohio State University

Wednesday July 15, 2009, 5:45 AM

Arthritis is degeneration or inflammation of joints that may result in pain, swelling, stiffness, and limited movement of the joint. There are over one hundred medical conditions that are associated with arthritis or joint pain. For arthritis sufferers, joint symptoms can cause significant levels of disability that interfere with daily activities.

About one in five (21%) of U.S.adults has some form of doctor-diagnosed arthritis. That's an estimated 46 million people. Two-thirds of these adults are under the age of 65. These numbers do not include the nearly 300,000 children under the age of 18 who are affected by juvenile arthritis.

At any age, females are more likely to be diagnosed with arthritis than males. Furthermore, women name arthritis as the cause of their disability more frequently than men (6.4 million women vs. 2.2 million men).

Because the incidence of arthritis increases with age, the number of individuals with arthritis who have a disability is projected to rise as baby boomers get older. By the year 2030, if rates remain stable,
an estimated 67 million people (ages 18 years and older) will have doctor-diagnosed arthritis

Arthritis is more serious than you may think

Arthritis is such a debilitating disease that it ranks as the most common cause of disability in the United States.

Arthritis-related disability has been on the rise; since 1999, the number of people who report arthritis as the primary cause of their disability has increased by 1 million. Arthritis is a more frequent reason for activity limitation than heart disease, cancer, or diabetes.

Loss of independence

Arthritis can keep people from living their lives to the fullest. Many people with arthritis require help performing such daily activities as:

• Getting out of bed
• Dressing
• Eating
• Attending to personal care

For some, this means losing their ability to live independently.

Work disability

Joint problems lead to work limitations in 40% of individuals with arthritis. Many workers affected with arthritis leave their jobs earlier than those without arthritis. Arthritis is second only to heart disease as a cause of work disability.

Staying healthy with arthritis

The behaviors recommended for healthy living in the general population are also important for controlling symptoms and preventing functional loss in individuals with arthritis. These healthy behaviors include:

• Exercising regularly
• Eating a well-balanced diet
• Maintaining a healthy weight

Exercise and arthritis

For adults with arthritis, physical activity can:

• Reduce pain
• Improve function
• Reduce the risk for disability
Lower the risk for heart disease or type II diabetes -- arthritis affects more than half of adults with diabetes and heart disease.

Daily physical activity can reduce some of the difficulties associated with arthritis.

Exercise improves muscle strength and joint range of motion. Improved muscle strength and tone can help to reduce the stressful forces on joints, thus reducing pain and future damage.

In addition to strength training and cardiovascular exercises, gentle stretching and relaxation should also be included. Consultation with a physical therapist is a good option for many people with arthritis.

**Getting started**

Any physical activity is better than none, but the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans suggest that low-impact, moderate-intensity aerobic activity totaling 150 minutes a week and muscle strengthening exercise at least 2 days a week generally are safe, beneficial, and achievable for persons with chronic conditions such as arthritis.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- **Talk to your doctor:** Before beginning an exercise routine, consult your physician to ensure that it is safe to exercise and always pace yourself, rest, and understand your limitations. Be aware of how joints move, and use care when engaging in twisting motions.

- **Balance your activities:** Too much or too little activity can lead to muscle and joint pain and stiffness, so finding a balance is key for improved health.

- **Keep a journal:** Use a journal of activities to track when excessive discomfort is experienced. When pain is felt, hot or cold treatments can help. Depending on the person and affliction, one may be more effective than the other. Try warm baths, heating pads, and ice packs to see what works best. Judicious use of over-the-counter muscle & joint ointments/creams may also alleviate morning stiffness.

**You Can Do It!**

In summary, things you can do to reduce and minimize the burden of arthritis include:

- 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. Judicious use of a muscle and joint ointment/cream may help to alleviate morning stiffness.

• Use 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.

The CDC has information about physical activity and self-management education programs that are proven to improve the quality of life of people with arthritis.

Contact your local Arthritis Foundation office for programs offered in your area. Tips, podcasts, and online tools to help persons with arthritis achieve better overall health by being physically active are available at Lets Move Together.org.

References and resources

• Arthritis Facts

• Living with Arthritis


• The Best Way to Prevent Osteoarthritis

• Treating and Preventing Arthritis

See more in Netwellness