Arthritis: Making Good Lifestyle Choices

Arthritis involves more than 100 different conditions that share similar symptoms: joint and musculoskeletal pain that can range from mild to crippling. A key component in successfully managing arthritis is to feel in control of the disease. Research shows that people who feel in control experience less pain and fewer limitations. Feeling in control can come from making good lifestyle choices.

One in six Canadians has some form of arthritis and, as our population ages, that figure will rise to one in five by 2031. Arthritis is already a leading cause of disability in Canada and a 2011 report estimated that it may cost the Canadian economy more than $33 billion annually — due to the fact that three of every five people with the disease are of working age.

Taking Control of Arthritis

An early diagnosis is important because without treatment the condition can get progressively worse, leading to a loss of function in the affected joint(s). While arthritis can be debilitating — affecting every aspect of a person’s life — medication, therapy, and some simple lifestyle modifications can make a big difference. If you are suffering from arthritis here are some things you can do to take control.

✔️ Watch your weight. Excess weight can cause stress on joints and potentially increase pain and discomfort in those with arthritis. If you tend to be overweight, losing even 10 to 15 pounds can reduce pain. If you are severely overweight, talk to your doctor about a weight loss program that will allow you to lose weight safely.

✔️ Reduce stress. Stress increases muscle tension, which can worsen arthritis pain. This can set off a cycle of increased pain, decreased ability to function and greater stress. Take time to relax. Meditation, deep breathing, massage and yoga are some great ways to calm both body and mind.

✔️ Eat a healthy diet. There is a lot of debate about whether particular foods ease or worsen arthritis symptoms. There is evidence that omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids, contained in oily fish (such as salmon), can ease the symptoms of inflammatory arthritis. A diet of vegetables, fruit, lean meats (or alternatives), grains and dairy products (or alternatives) not only gives your body the energy and nutrition it needs but helps you maintain your weight, keeps your heart happy and helps bolster your immune system.

✔️ Move! Exercise can be the last thing you want to do when you’re in pain. However, exercising is actually one of the best ways to manage your arthritis. It helps increase joint mobility, muscle strength,
and energy while reducing stiffness. Exercise can also make you feel good by releasing endorphins —
chemicals that help deaden pain and give a feeling of well-being — into your system. Exercise also helps
with weight control. There are many activities open to you. Walking is one of the best options because
it doesn’t place too much stress on joints. Other options are:

- cycling
- swimming
- dancing
- yoga
- pilates
- tai chi

Do, however, listen to your body. If the activity hurts excessively or if you begin to have unusual pain, stop. If you are unsure about how to start, talk to a doctor or physical therapist about developing an
exercise plan that is best for you.

Get plenty of sleep. Getting plenty of sleep on a regular basis can minimize pain and help you cope
with your disease. If arthritis pain makes it difficult to sleep at night, speak with your doctor. You can
also improve your sleep by getting enough exercise early in the day; avoiding caffeine or alcoholic
beverages in the evening; keeping your bedroom dark, quiet, and cool and taking a warm bath before
retiring.

Maintain a positive attitude. Your state of mind is an essential element in your physical and emotional
health and wellbeing. When depression sets in, we’re less likely to take care of ourselves, which means
we don’t feel well, which means we’re more depressed and a downward spiral begins. Although arthritis
isn’t fun, it doesn’t mean you have to stop living life to the fullest. As much as possible, get out with
friends, enjoy hobbies, engage in volunteer activities and laugh.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Talk to your doctor, join a support group, reach out to friends or contact your
Employee and Family Assistance Program.

September is Arthritis Awareness Month. For 65 years, The Arthritis Society has been setting lives in motion at
work, life and play, and continues its work to provide education, programs and services to help Canadians live well. Bringing awareness to this disease will help move us all forward as research efforts get us closer to finding a cure. For more information, please visit www.arthritis.ca.