

Tips for Living with Arthritis

Arthritis is defined as joint inflammation. There are many types of arthritis, which may affect one or more joints in the body. Most joints have the potential to develop arthritis, which causes swelling, stiffness, decreased ability to move, pain, and possible deformity. *Osteoarthritis*, the most common form of arthritis, gets worse over time and is caused by trauma or a defect in the smooth, white tissue covering the ends of bones where they come together to form joints. Osteoarthritis affects the large weight-bearing joints such as the shoulders, knees, hips, and spine, and the small joints of the hands, most commonly the thumbs. *Rheumatoid arthritis* is a chronic disorder affecting any part of the body, including large or small joints, the heart and circulatory system, the lungs and the muscles used for breathing, and the digestive system. Joint replacement surgery is often recommended for people with arthritis when they are no longer able to do the things they want and need to do.

Occupational therapy practitioners help people with arthritis live life to its fullest by maximizing their ability to participate in activities (occupations), promoting safety, and enhancing quality of life. The following tips are from occupational therapy practitioners working with people with arthritis.

If you want to:	Consider these activity tips:	An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:
Reduce pressure and discomfort in your hands when holding or working with objects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap foam, cloth, or tape around the handles of objects such as knives and pots and pans to cushion the grip. Use household and gardening tools with larger, ergonomically designed handles, which are available in many retail outlets. • Use tools to make everyday tasks easier. For example, jar openers will reduce the stress on finger joints. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend personalized adaptive equipment that will put less stress on your joints when performing the activities that you want and need to do. The occupational therapist will help determine what equipment will work best for you and provide you with training in how to use it.
Reduce pain before, during, and after activities and while sleeping.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply either heat or cold to your joints before and after performing an activity. Elevate and support your arms or legs on pillows when sleeping. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruct you in how to use compression garments and thermal agents (providing heat and cold). • Make custom splints to rest, support, and/or properly position your joints during activities or while sleeping. Instruct you in proper positioning to prevent or minimize deformity.
Increase the ability to easily stand from a seated position and prevent falls.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Install a raised toilet seat and grab bars in the bathroom. Sit in armchairs and use the arms to push off when moving from sitting to standing. • Remove all throw rugs to prevent tripping. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze your daily activities and suggest appropriate adaptive equipment to improve your independence and safety.

If you want to:	Consider these activity tips:	An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:
<p>Avoid or reduce pain and stress on your joints.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use carts or carriers with wheels to move garbage cans, grocery bags, laundry, and other heavy items so you don't have to lift them. Use suitcases with wheels. • Replace round doorknobs and faucet handles with lever-style handles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate your home or workplace and suggest changes and modifications that will make it easier for you to perform daily tasks. Design adaptive equipment or recommend assistive devices to help you do daily activities while protecting your joints.
<p>Have more energy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in light exercise. • Eat well and get enough sleep. • Pace yourself when performing activities that require stress and strain on the body. Do not perform any one task for an extended period, and take frequent breaks during the day. • Ask for help when you need it so you don't become exhausted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address both the physical and emotional effects of arthritis. Recommend therapeutic activities and exercises designed to decrease stiffness and improve endurance and strength. Suggest activities that should be avoided, while addressing depression and emotional stress resulting from lack of sleep because of pain, disability, or an inability to do meaningful activities.
<p>Continue to do the things that are important to you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate daily tasks, including leisure activities, into manageable amounts, and take breaks when necessary. • Prioritize the things that are meaningful to you, and make time for them first. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at how you do your daily activities and routines, and suggest ways to do them differently to avoid stress on your joints, pain, and reduced energy levels. • Help you engage in community activities by evaluating your ability to comfortably and safely drive your car and suggest modifications or alternative transportation options if driving is too uncomfortable.

Need More Information?

Occupational therapy practitioners are employed by private and community outpatient clinics, hospitals, and home-care services. Medicare and other health insurance policies cover their services. A physician's prescription is generally required for occupational therapy services for insurance reimbursement.

You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.