



Creating an Arthritis Action Plan

People with arthritis often take a variety of medications to deal with their pain and stiffness. But, by using what they learn in programs that teach them how to stay active and manage their pain and stress, they can get up to 80 percent more relief from pain and joint tenderness than they can get from medication alone.

“Clearly, taking arthritis medication is important, but what people do for themselves, including exercising, doing relaxation exercises and managing their emotions and attitudes, is just as crucial to their ability to lead active, productive lives,” says Kate Lorig, M.D., Ph.D., an associate professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine, in Palo Alto, California, and director of the Stanford Patient Education Research Center. She and her colleagues developed the Arthritis Self-Management Program, which is offered nationwide by the Arthritis Foundation.

Adding the following self-care steps to your daily routine can help you cope with your pain and stiffness.

Essential Self-Care

- **Exercise regularly.** Doing gentle flexibility and strengthening exercises daily helps build and preserve muscle strength, protects joints from further stress and keeps them flexible. “Current medical and scientific evidence shows that exercise is one of the most useful and direct ways in which you can help minimize the pain and limitations of arthritis,” says Shannon Whetstone Mescher, M.Ed., CHES, Vice President of Programs and Services for the Arthritis Foundation in Atlanta. Yoga is an excellent activity for arthritis sufferers because the movements and positions are gentle and can be done at your own pace.
- **Practice pain and stress-management techniques.** “Progressive muscle relaxation, in which you lie down and relax one set of muscles at a time, continuing throughout the body, is especially helpful,” says Dr. Lorig. Dr. Lorig also teaches arthritis sufferers to monitor their self-talk to change negative messages. Instead of patients saying, “I can’t get up this morning,” she teaches them to utter supportive messages such as “I can get out of bed today—and I’ll feel better after I take a hot shower and do some exercise.”
- **Apply moist heat and cold packs.** Heat can ease chronic osteoarthritis pain, while cold applications usually are best for severe pain experienced during flare-ups. “Depending on your symptoms and the time of day, you might find either heat or cold or a combination of the two are most beneficial,” says Ms. Mescher.
- **Keep your weight under control.** Excess weight can stress weight-bearing joints and worsen osteoarthritis. If you’re 10 pounds or more overweight, try to slim down by reducing your fat consumption. No particular foods are recommended for arthritis sufferers except for those with gout, a form of arthritis that can be aggravated by wine and meat. Vitamin C, however, may help repair cartilage, and omega-3 fatty acids may help reduce inflammation.
- **Protect your joints.** Ask a physical therapist to teach you how to use your joints in ways that won’t further stress them.
- **Join a support group.** This is one of the best ways to educate yourself about your condition and to receive emotional support from people who know what you’re going through. Contact the Arthritis Foundation to find a group in your area.

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Dealing With Late-Life Depression

Everyone feels sad sometimes – it’s a natural part of life. But when sadness or other symptoms of depression persist and interfere with your everyday life, you may be suffering from clinical depression.

“Recognizing depression in older people isn’t always easy,” says Joel E. Streim, M.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. “The depressed person or the person’s family may think a change in mood or behavior is the person’s natural response to illness or the loss of a loved one, or is simply the way people behave as they age.”

The older person himself may not be able to describe how he is feeling, or may be afraid of being labeled “crazy” or “weak.” Older adults today grew up in a time when depression wasn’t recognized as a medical illness, says the American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP).

Depression in an older adult may be a recurrence of depression from earlier in life, or it could be brought on by another illness, the AAGP says.

Because depression isn’t a normal part of growing older, it’s important to learn the signs of this condition and seek help if you or a loved one could be suffering from it.

According to the AAGP, some common symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sadness or depressed mood (lasting two weeks or longer)
- Feeling slowed down or agitated
- Excessive worries
- Frequent crying
- Changes in appetite, weight or sleep patterns
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Pacing or fidgeting
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Suicidal thoughts

Another important sign of depression is giving up regular social activities, the AAGP says. A person with depression also may neglect how he or she looks, or may cook less and eat less.

Causes

Sometimes depression occurs for no apparent reason, the AAGP says. But it often can be triggered by a specific event, such as the death of a loved one, a financial setback, deteriorating vision or the inability to live independently.

Chronic illnesses are common causes for depression, and some diseases—such as cancer, thyroid disease, Parkinson’s disease, heart disease, stroke and Alzheimer’s disease— are commonly associated with the condition.

“That’s why it’s important for anyone with symptoms of depression to see their primary care doctor, so illnesses that could be causing or contributing to the condition can be identified and treated,” says Dr. Streim.

Suicide

Suicide is more common in older adults than in any other age group, the AAGP says. People older than 65 make up more than 25 percent of the nation’s suicides; white men older than 80 are the largest risk group. Suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts or talk by older adults should always be taken seriously.

Treatment and help

The first step in treatment for depression is to have the older adult get a complete medical checkup, says the AAGP. That’s because the depression may be an indicator of a medical condition or caused by a certain medication.

Most people with depression improve dramatically by taking antidepressants and meeting regularly with a psychiatrist or therapist.

“Depression is a medical illness and is no less treatable than heart disease or diabetes,” says Dr. Streim. “Seeking professional help and treatment for someone suffering from depression can restore mental and physical health and improve their quality of life overall.”

