



## Staying Active When You Have Arthritis

Many older adults who are living in a skilled nursing facility have arthritis. Over 25% of all older adults do. You might think that medications are the only treatment for arthritis, but that is actually only a small part of the help that is available. Today, fewer people with arthritis are taking the powerful opioid medications that were once routinely prescribed for pain. We now know that opioids aren't as safe as once thought.

It's good to know that there are many other ways to treat arthritis. Medication is only part of the picture. In fact, the best way to lessen the pain and stiffness of arthritis is exercise.

Not so many years ago there was a common belief that people with arthritis should take it easy. They were told to rest their joints and to avoid movements that might be painful.

We now know that this was very bad advice! Exercise is one of the best ways to lubricate the joints and keep them flexible, thereby lessening pain. Avoiding movement can lead to a downward cycle, in which a person with arthritis is afraid to move a painful joint ... and the consequent immobility makes pain and stiffness all the worse.

Exercising also helps residents lose weight. Those extra pounds put a lot of strain on the joints, and studies show that losing even a little bit of weight can make a difference.

It can seem counterintuitive to move a painful hand, knee, shoulder or other joint. This is where nursing home staff can be so helpful. Did you know that anxiety increases the sensation of pain? Studies show that one of the best ways to make exercise more comfortable is to provide patients with the information they need to be confident they're performing movements the correct way!



Before beginning an exercise plan, it's important to get an individualized exercise "prescription" from the doctor. This will most likely include low-impact, joint-friendly activities from four main categories:

- *range-of-motion exercises* to improve flexibility and relieve stiffness
- *strengthening exercises* to help muscles support the joints
- *balance exercises* to reduce the risk of falls
- *aerobic or endurance exercises* to reduce swelling in some joints and help maintain a healthy weight

Walking is a great exercise for people with arthritis. If a resident is nervous about making their way around, having helpful staff on hand provides an extra measure of confidence. The same goes for exercise classes.

Rehabilitation department staff provide supervision during exercise, as well as other therapies, which might include body mechanics training, massage, heat and cold treatments, splinting or electrical nerve stimulation. The rehab department can also help patients and residents with the use of assistive devices such as walkers and canes.

*Continued on page 4*

# Overcoming an Epidemic of Senior Loneliness

**At every age, people need people.**



As we grow older, it can be harder to stay socially connected. A recent poll conducted by University of Michigan Medicine experts found that 25% of older adults report feeling lonely and isolated. While staying socially connected has always been a challenge for older adults—think of the old cliché “shut in”—the problem is getting worse.

## What’s behind this trend?

- People are living longer, but those extra years aren’t necessarily healthy ones. Mobility problems, hearing and vision loss, and memory changes all make it harder to get out where the people are.
- More seniors than ever are living alone. Today, older Americans are more likely than previous generations to have divorced or never married, and they have fewer children. Families often live far apart, with children moving away when they grow up.
- Retirement often means the loss of a senior’s social network. And many seniors relocate after retirement, which means starting from scratch to build new friendships.
- “Intergenerational apartheid.” That’s the term coined by a think tank in the UK, calling attention to the fact that today, there is much less day-to-day interaction among people of different ages—an unhealthy situation for a society.

## Loneliness is a health problem.

Did you know that social isolation is such a serious public health problem that in 2018, the U.K. created the position of Minister of Loneliness? Study after study shows that loneliness can be as bad for our health as smoking or obesity. Brain scans demonstrate that we experience loneliness in the same area of the brain in which we feel physical pain! It raises our risk of diabetes, memory loss and heart disease. It can even shorten our lives.

## How can seniors stay connected?

Family members today play a big part in keeping their older loved ones connected. A senior’s adult children, spouse and others can encourage their loved one to get out more—and can help make it happen, perhaps by locating opportunities and providing transportation and companionship. But experts tell us that family ties are not enough!

Just as teenagers wouldn’t describe themselves as having a great social life if they hung out only with their parents, older adults need non-family friendships. Said Michigan State University psychology professor William Chopik, “Friendships become even more important as we age. Studies show that friendships predict day-to-day happiness and ultimately how long we’ll live, more so than spousal and family relationships.”

## The more, the merrier.

University of Texas at Austin experts say seniors who spend more time interacting with a wide range of people have better physical and emotional well-being. And it’s good to know that while deep, intense friendships are very nourishing, we also benefit from frequent brief interactions with faces that have become familiar. Dr. Gillian Sandstrom of the University of Essex calls these “weak ties”—the friendly interactions we have with the mailman, the people at the coffee shop, the bus driver, or the staff at our senior living community or senior center.

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“A huge part of our happiness comes from our social relationships,” reports Dr. Sandstrom. “It’s important that we feel able to connect with new people because today’s strangers are tomorrow’s friends.” Today’s culture presents some barriers, of course. Dr. Sandstrom took part in a study session put on by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology which found that many of us feel a sense of “stranger danger”: we are afraid to strike up a conversation with someone we don’t know, and we’re not confident they would want to talk to us! But her study found that even though people might initially be apprehensive when a stranger talks to them, they usually begin to enjoy the interaction.

So, go ahead and make conversation with the people you meet! And here are some other ways to shake things up and spend more time interacting with others:

- **Go to work.** If you’ve retired but you’re missing the social benefits of work (and, perhaps, the money), look into a part-time job that you would enjoy.
- **Check out activities** offered by your local senior center, parks and recreation department, your faith community or neighborhood organizations. Take up a hobby that you can do with others—anything from quilting to playing bridge to performing in an amateur musical group.
- **Volunteer service** is one of the best ways to connect with others. Check out opportunities at schools, service organizations, a local animal shelter, a homeless assistance group ... even a political organization (but watch your blood pressure). There are volunteer positions for almost everyone, regardless of their age and health condition.

- **Get healthy with others.** Sign up for a senior health program—a senior exercise program at the gym, a fall prevention program, or a senior nutrition class. You’ll learn some healthy living skills, and you’ll no doubt find that you have much in common with other participants.
- **If you live in a senior living community,** take advantage of social opportunities. Whether it’s a retirement or assisted living community, or a long-term residential care setting, make a point of interacting with other residents and staff. (It goes both ways, too. Working with older adults offers many benefits for younger folks. It’s a great way to feel connected with the world.)
- **Check out social media.** While a Facebook post isn’t the same as an in-person interaction, studies show that online socializing can help seniors keep in touch with family and friends. Taking part in online communities of “Facebook friends” can provide a form of companionship, as well. If socializing online feels like a positive experience, go for it.

### **We can all do our part.**

Experts say doctors should ask senior patients if they’re experiencing feelings of isolation as part of routine health screening. Just as a senior’s healthcare provider would prescribe medical tests or medication, they can also issue a “social prescription.” And everyone can help. Erica Solway, Ph.D., lead author of the University of Michigan Medicine poll, stresses “the importance of proactively reaching out to those in your community who may be at risk of feeling isolated and disconnected, especially those with or at risk of health issues.”

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## How's Your Working Memory?

"I met that guy ten minutes ago and now I can't remember his name!" This classic "senior moment" is so typical of the age-related changes we experience in our "working memory," the ability of the mind to temporarily store and manage information we need for reasoning and learning.

A research team from the University of California, Riverside found that three factors are involved in the decline in working memory over time. The first factor, age itself, we can't do anything about. But the other two factors, sleep quality and depression, are treatable! The three factors work in different ways. Sleep problems and depression make it less likely that we will remember something; age negatively affects the accuracy of memories.

Said psychology professor Weiwei Zhang, "All three factors are interrelated. For example, seniors are more likely to experience negative mood than younger adults. Poor sleep quality is also often associated with depressed mood." The study suggests that treating sleep problems and depression could improve memory—regardless of our age.

## Arthritis *from page 1*

Used improperly, these devices can make a person less safe! But with training, residents can be much more independent using them.

The rehab staff can do much more. Patients and residents can learn to do things in a different way that overcomes their limitations. Can't open that container? Try this handy jar opener! Is it hard to zip your dress or tie your shoes? There's a gadget for those activities, too. Senior-friendly adaptations such as a raised toilet seat and grab bars help, as well. And to help residents avoid movements that are genuinely dangerous or unadvised, staff are there to lend a hand.

Skilled nursing facilities also prepare nutritious meals that support joint health, help residents manage their medications, and coordinate healthcare appointments. And if the doctor decides a joint replacement is in order, a skilled nursing facility is a great place to recover, receive therapy, and access all the resources a patient needs for the best possible success.