

Relieving Arthritis



Arthritis, which means joint inflammation, causes pain, stiffness, and swelling in the joints, such as the fingers, neck, back, hips, and knees. Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, is swelling of the joints caused by the wearing down of joint tissue and cartilage. Osteoarthritis affects the weight-bearing joints of the arms and legs, such as the knees, hips, shoulders, elbows, ankles, and thumbs, and often can be improved by joint replacement surgery. Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term disorder that can involve the major organs of the body. It causes painful swelling of the legs, arms, and spine. The disease may get worse over time and lead to joint damage that cannot be repaired.

The pain caused by arthritis can affect how a person functions in the home and workplace. Occupational therapists can suggest modifications to help people with arthritis to work and live independently while avoiding stress to the joints.

What can an occupational therapist do?

- **Make** custom splints to rest or support limbs.
- **Design** adaptive equipment or recommend assistive devices to help the client function better in daily activities.
- **Evaluate** the client's home or workplace and suggest changes and modifications that will make arthritis easier to live with.
- **Advise** what exercises can relieve the pain of arthritis and which activities should be avoided.
- **Determine** the psychological effects of arthritis, such as depression and emotional stress resulting from lack of sleep because of pain, disfigurement, or an inability to complete certain meaningful tasks. Occupational therapists can recommend coping strategies to combat emotional effects.

What can a person with arthritis do?

- **Wrap** foam, cloth, or tape around the handles of objects, such as knives and cooking pots and pans to cushion the grip. Household and gardening tools with larger, ergonomically designed handles are now available for sale in many retail outlets.
- **Avoid** lifting heavy objects by using carts or carriers with wheels to move suitcases, garbage cans, and grocery bags.
- **Use** a jar opener to avoid twisting the fingers and hands. Replace round doorknobs and faucet handles with lever-style handles.
- **Pace** yourself. Separate daily tasks, including leisure activities, into manageable amounts, and take breaks when necessary.

Need more information?

All forms of arthritis are serious and can affect many aspects of a person's life, including work and leisure activities. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, practitioners are available through most hospitals, medical centers, and clinics. Contact your doctor or other local health officials for more information.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping both adults and children

with a broad range of physical, developmental, and behavioral conditions in addition to arthritis, such as low back pain, mood disorders, and substance use disorders. Occupational therapy practitioners also advise people in home modification and in preventing falls, and help clients in wellness techniques that may prevent injury and disease.