

## **LIVING WITH OSTEOARTHRITIS – ONE DAY AT A TIME**

If an older family member – or you – suffer from the aches and pains of osteoarthritis you're not alone. An estimated 27 million people suffer from this disease. It is also the most common health condition in people 65 and older.

Arthritis has plagued humans since 4500 BC, according to historians. Signs of joint disorders have been found in Egyptian mummies and prehistoric early Americans. Osteoarthritis is not just limited to humans. Dogs, cats, horses and other animals can also develop arthritis symptoms as they age.

Arthritis most commonly occurs in the hips, knees, spine, hands and feet although it can affect any joint in the body. It develops gradually and usually begins with the minor aches and pains of middle-age that result from breakdown of cartilage -- the cushiony substance that helps joints move smoothly. Without the protection of cartilage, bone surfaces rub against each other causing pain and damage to joints that gradually increases as the disease progresses.

### **DIAGNOSING OSTEOARTHRITIS**

Joint pain is usually the first sign of arthritis. Moving the affected joint will cause pain while rest makes the joint feel better. Other common arthritis symptoms include:

- Pain in the hands, hips, knees, neck and lower back joints
- Joint stiffness – especially in the morning
- Inflamed and tender joints
- Creaking, grating or popping joints
- Deformed and thickened joints
- Limited ability to move a joint

If your older parent complains of joint pain suggest that she schedule a doctor's visit for a physical exam that focuses on her painful joints. Help her make a list of symptoms she is experiencing, a list of prescription and non-prescription medicines she takes and questions she has for the doctor.

Although the doctor cannot cure your parent's arthritis he or she can suggest medications and lifestyle changes that will ease her pain or the doctor can also refer your relative to a rheumatologist – a physician who specializes in diagnosing and treating a variety of bone and joint disorders.

### **LIVING WITH OSTEOARTHRITIS**

As the disease progresses, osteoarthritis will become a painful part of your parent's life. It will become increasingly difficult to manage basic activities of daily living like getting dressed, taking a bath, managing household chores, preparing a meal, gardening, driving – even getting in and out of a car – without pain.

The good news is that there are a variety of remedies, techniques, strategies and devices available that will make it possible for your older relative to manage arthritis symptoms and make the most of daily life with minimal pain.

## **PAIN & SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT**

Although there is no cure for arthritis there are a variety of home remedies and strategies you and your older relative can use to manage pain. Encourage him or her to treat pain with over-the-counter pain relievers and apply cold packs to the affected joint. Warm packs and baths are relaxing and help relieve joint stiffness.

Over-the-counter pain relievers like aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen are good for treating mild pain. Ibuprofen (Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) can relieve inflammation that often accompanies joint pain. If your relative takes prescription or OTC medicines for other ailments talk to the doctor or pharmacist about potential interactions with other drugs.

## **PHYSICAL THERAPY**

Physical therapists are experts in helping people of all ages adjust to living with joint-related illnesses like arthritis. A physical therapist can teach your relative how to reduce strain on arthritic joints and suggest exercise routines to decrease stiffness and increase mobility. Physical therapists may be able to suggest assistive devices and arthritis aids that will help your parent manage personal care and household activities safely.

## **ARTHRITIS AIDS TO MAKE LIFE EASIER**

A huge variety of clever devices are available to help make daily activities easier for older people with or without physical disabilities. They include such arthritis-friendly gadgets as:

- Grab bars for bathrooms and showers
- Foot warmers
- Kitchen tools and gadgets
- Garden tools
- Canes
- Ergonomic pens and pencils
- Elbow and knee supports
- Elevated toilet seats
- Long-handled bathroom sponges

Catalogs of such products are available online. Your parent's doctor or a local library may be able to help you find information about these and other useful devices.

## **MANAGING CAREGIVER EMOTIONS**

It can be difficult for families of older adults to see a parent, spouse or other family member suffering from the pain of arthritis. As a caregiver you can help your parent adjust to the physical changes caused by the disease and manage its painful symptoms. [758/3-10]