

# Managing Your Pain

**CAUSES OF  
PAIN AND TIPS  
FOR TAKING  
CONTROL**



[arthritis.org](https://www.arthritis.org)



## About Arthritis Pain

Coping with pain can be the hardest part of having arthritis or a related condition. Pain can interfere with your ability to go about your daily tasks at home and work. It can prevent you from resting and getting enough sleep. However, you can learn to manage pain and limit its impact on your life. The first step is knowing which type of arthritis or condition you have; it will help determine the way you and your healthcare team work together to treat your pain.

### Everyone's Pain Is Different

Just as there are different types of arthritis, there also are different types of pain. Your own pain may vary from day to day and may affect different joints or body parts on any given day. Working with doctors and other healthcare providers to develop a personal pain management plan is critical. What works for one person might not work for someone else.

### What Causes Pain?

Pain from arthritis and related diseases results from several factors, including:

- Inflammation and damage to joint tissues.
- Pinched or damaged nerves.
- Pain amplification within the nervous system.

In addition to physical changes, emotional stress and fatigue can add to your pain. You can get caught in a cycle of pain, limited or lost abilities, stress and depression – all of which can make managing pain and arthritis more difficult.

## How the Body Controls Pain

Pain signals travel through a system of nerves located throughout your body. Pain information goes to several parts of the brain that recognize pain but also help control and adjust mood, sleep and hormones. That's why having chronic pain can affect so many aspects of your body and daily life.

When you experience pain, your body may stop or limit pain by creating chemicals to block pain signals traveling through nerves. Different factors, such as your own thoughts and emotions, can either make pain worse or cause the body to produce pain-relieving chemicals.



Learn more about pain management at [arthritis.org/pain](https://www.arthritis.org/pain).

### Types of Pain

**Acute pain** tells you that you need to act. It usually lasts a short time, from a few seconds after a burn or injury to a few weeks for a back strain. Acute pain is limited and can usually be relieved with medication.

**Chronic pain** is long-lasting, like the kind that accompanies arthritis or related conditions like fibromyalgia. It often isn't as easy to relieve as acute pain. And contrary to logic, getting the disease under control doesn't always help. Over time, chronic pain can become entrenched and difficult to treat. Managing this type of pain is essential to improving your quality of life.

## Changing Your Reaction to Pain

You can learn to manage your pain by thinking of pain as a signal that can be changed through positive actions.

**Keep a positive attitude.** Don't allow pain to control your life. Think positive thoughts, have a sense of humor, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, surround yourself with positive people and enjoy activities with friends and family.

**Distract yourself.** The amount of time you spend thinking about pain has a lot to do with how much discomfort you feel. One way to take your mind off pain is to focus on something else. The more you focus on a hobby or other activity, the less you'll think about physical discomfort.

**Shift your perspective.** Think of pain as your body's message to do something different. For example, if your pain is worse after sitting for a period of time, your body may be telling you to get up and move around.

**Practice positive self-talk.** What we say to ourselves often determines what we do and how we look at life. Practice turning your negative statements around. Instead of saying "My knees are

### Factors That Worsen Pain

- Increased disease activity
- Emotional and/or physical stress
- Focusing on pain
- Fatigue and/or poor sleep
- Anxiety
- Depression

killing me,” say, “Going for a walk usually loosens them up, I’ll try that.”

**Change your habits.** Try doing something positive in place of an old pain-escaping habit. Instead of reaching for another dose of pain medicine, reach for an ice pack or warm compress.

**Track what works.** Make a chart of pain-control methods you’ve tried to track ones that work best for you.

## Treating Pain

One main component of treating arthritis pain is treating the underlying disease. Work with your doctor to develop a complete disease and pain management plan. Many different types of treatments are available to help control arthritis pain, ranging from medications to hot and cold treatments, to relaxation techniques.

### How Are You Handling Pain?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, it’s time to find different ways to manage pain. Do you:

- Finish pain medicine faster than you used to?
- Spend a lot of time in bed, aside from your regular sleep time?
- Cancel planned activities at the last moment because of pain?
- Drink alcohol to ease your pain?
- Think about pain or arthritis much of the time?

## Medications That Treat Pain

**Analgesics** are drugs that help relieve pain. Acetaminophen is an over-the-counter (OTC) analgesic that temporarily relieves common arthritis pain but doesn't reduce swelling or inflammation.

**Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDs) help reduce pain, stiffness and swelling. OTC NSAIDs include aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen sodium. Others are available by prescription.

**Glucocorticoids** (corticosteroids) are drugs related to the natural hormone in your body called cortisol. These drugs quickly and effectively reduce swelling and inflammation, but side effects limit their long-term use. They can be taken as pills or injected directly into joints, spine or other tissues.

**Antidepressants** not only relieve the anxiety and depression often associated with chronic pain, but some relieve pain and improve sleep. These medications work by changing the levels of chemicals in the brain and spinal cord that are linked to pain sensitivity and sleeping problems. Certain antidepressants have more of an effect on pain, others have a greater effect on sleep.

**Topical pain relievers** can help relieve arthritis pain. These include gels, creams, rubs and sprays that are applied to the skin over a painful muscle or joint. Topical pain relievers may contain salicylates, skin irritants, NSAIDs, local anesthetics, and capsaicin.

**Anticonvulsants** are medicines used to treat seizures, but they have been found to be beneficial in certain types of pain, especially those caused by damage to the nerves. Pregabalin (*Lyrica*), which has been used to treat seizures and nerve pain associated with shingles and diabetes, is approved by the FDA to treat fibromyalgia.

**Nerve blocks** are injections of anesthetic drugs (similar to what a dentist uses) directly into the nerves of the painful area. Nerve blocks can be used to help with nerve pain due to a variety of causes, including that related to arthritis of the spine. Nerve blocks are more effective for acute pain than chronic pain, and they can cause temporary muscle weakness.

**Hyaluronic acid therapy** involves injecting the knee joint with a substance found naturally in joint fluid that helps lubricate and cushion the joint. These injections are given directly into the knee(s) weekly for up to five weeks, depending on the product chosen.

## When Is Surgery an Option?

Most people with arthritis will never need joint surgery. But when other treatments don't lessen the pain or when you have major difficulty using your joints, surgery may be necessary.

**Arthroscopy** is a procedure that allows the surgeon to view your joint through an instrument placed in a small opening in the skin. It can be used to repair injuries such as a torn meniscus or remove loose pieces of cartilage. Sometimes it is used to get a sample of joint tissue to help with diagnosis.

**Synovectomy** is a procedure in which the diseased lining of the joint – the synovium – is removed. It may help relieve pain and swelling.

**Joint fusion, or arthrodesis**, is a procedure that permanently fuses damaged joints. It relieves the chronic pain of some joints, such as the wrists, but reduces mobility.

**Joint replacement** is a procedure in which a damaged joint (or a portion of the joint) is replaced with artificial parts. It relieves pain and may restore some function.

## Non-Medicinal Treatments for Pain

**Heat and cold treatments** can reduce the pain and stiffness of arthritis. Cold packs numb the sore area and reduce inflammation and swelling. Cold is especially good for joint pain caused by a flare. Heat relaxes your muscles and stimulates blood circulation.

**Massage** brings warmth and relaxation to the painful area. You can massage your own muscles or you can go to a professional massage therapist.

**Biofeedback** uses sensitive electrical equipment to help you become more aware of your body's reaction to stress and pain. If you practice relaxation while using biofeedback, you can learn to control some of your body's responses to pain.

**Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)** involves a small device that delivers mild electric pulses to nerves to help relieve pain. Stimulation of the nerves by TENS doesn't hurt, but it may cause a tingling, vibrating or tapping sensation.

**Acupuncture** is an ancient Chinese practice of inserting small, thin needles into the skin at specific points on the body. The needles may stimulate nerves to block pain signals.

**Ultrasound** uses high-energy sound waves to bring comfort to painful joints and muscles.





# Controlling Pain

## Practice Joint Protection

Using your joints wisely means doing everyday tasks in ways that reduce stress on painful joints. It also means learning to pace yourself.

- Use proper methods for bending, lifting, reaching, sitting and standing. Use your largest and strongest muscles.
- Use assistive devices, such as braces, jar openers and reachers that reduce stress on affected joints.
- Move or change positions often to prevent stiffness and pain.
- Alternate activity with rest – even when you are feeling well. Take breaks when you need them.
- Use labor-saving devices and shortcuts that require less of your energy and place less stress on your joints.
- Ask for help when you need it.

## Engage in Physical Activity

Regular physical activity can help you effectively manage pain. Through exercise, you can improve your overall health and fitness as well as your arthritis symptoms. A physical therapist or certified personal trainer can put together an exercise program appropriate for you.

Get a mix of aerobic (endurance), muscle strengthening, and flexibility activities over the course of a week. Aerobic activity boosts feel-good chemicals (endorphins), fights pain, and improves mood and sleep. Strength training helps stabilize joints, and flexibility exercises help maintain joint range of motion.

## Get Better Sleep

Sleep restores your energy so you can better manage pain. It also rests your joints to reduce pain and swelling. Only you know how much sleep your body needs, but most people need approximately seven to nine hours of sleep per night. If you feel tired and achy after lunch every day, take a brief nap (15 to 20 minutes), if feasible. If you have trouble sleeping at night, you can try relaxing quietly in the afternoon rather than taking a nap.

### How To Sleep Better

- Avoid exercise right before bedtime.
- Keep your room cool, dark and quiet.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine, especially late in the day.
- Get up and go to bed at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Develop a relaxing bedtime ritual.
- Turn off all electronics 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Avoid taking sleeping pills unless your doctor recommends them.

## Practice Relaxation

Pain brings on both physical and emotional stress. Pain and stress have similar effects on the body. Muscles tighten, breathing becomes fast and shallow, and heart rate and blood pressure go up. Relaxation can help you reverse these effects and make it easier to manage pain.

Guided imagery, meditation, deep breathing, progressive relaxation, prayer and hypnosis are all examples of relaxation techniques you can try.

One way to reduce your pain is to build your life around wellness, not pain or sickness.

## Who Can Help

Talk to your healthcare team about ways to manage pain. In addition to your doctor or nurse practitioner, you may find help from other health professionals like an occupational or physical therapist, an exercise physiologist or a social worker.

Don't be afraid to suggest a pain management idea of your own. Remember, you're the expert on your body's pain experience.

**Pain management centers** provide expertise in the evaluation and treatment of pain using many different methods.

**Professional counselors** can help with any major disturbance in lifestyle – such as illness, chronic pain, family problems or increased dependence on others – that leads to feelings of anxiety, depression, anger or hopelessness.

**Cognitive behavioral therapists** are skilled at identifying thoughts and behaviors that are counterproductive to improving health.

**Support groups** allow you to share your feelings and experiences with a group of people who have similar challenges.



Find people who share your experiences at [arthritis.org/liveyes](https://www.arthritis.org/liveyes).



**It All  
Starts  
Here.**

**We realize you didn't sign up for arthritis. Our family is probably one you never planned to join. But our **Live Yes! Arthritis Network** is a special community where you'll find strength, support and solutions to live life to the fullest. Here are a few ways to start your journey:**

**I WANT TO CONNECT** with people going through a similar experience. **Go to [liveyes.arthritis.org](https://liveyes.arthritis.org)**

**I LOVE DATA** and want to know more about the latest research. **Go to [arthritis.org/arthritis-cure](https://arthritis.org/arthritis-cure)**

**I NEED PRACTICAL ADVICE** and tools to improve my everyday life. **Go to [arthritis.org/Tools](https://arthritis.org/Tools)**

**NEED HELP NOW?** Call us 24/7 at **844-571-HELP** or visit **[arthritis.org](https://arthritis.org)**.



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