

Got Joint Pain?

Join the club. More than 50 million adults in the U.S. have arthritis, and close to half of them say that the condition limits their daily activities, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That makes arthritis the country's leading cause of disability.

But, you can rein in the pain if you know what to do. And the answer isn't just popping a pill. Adding several non-drug options can cut the risk of dangerous side effects and result in better long-term control.

Get the right diagnosis

Check with a doctor to see if the pain stems from arthritis or another condition that causes similar symptoms, such as gout or Lyme disease. If it is arthritis, determine whether it's osteoarthritis, caused by wear and tear on the joints, or rheumatoid arthritis, a more serious form of the disease triggered by a malfunctioning immune system. Rheumatoid arthritis usually requires close medical supervision and a combination of prescription drugs. But many of the steps that follow, which are often enough to relieve osteoarthritis, can also help.

Use drugs carefully

Nonprescription drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil and generic) and naproxen (Aleve and generic) can ease pain and reduce inflammation. But when used regularly, both can cause stomach bleeding and high blood pressure. So it's best to limit their use to short-term flare-ups. Acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic) helps with pain, but taking too much can damage your liver. So keep your daily dose under 3,000 milligrams. And avoid alcohol, because that increases the risk. Topical treatments, such as over-the-counter capsaicin cream (Zostrix and generic), might help people with arthritis in smaller joints such as those in the ankles, elbows, feet, fingers, and toes. Or ask your doctor about the topical version of the prescription drug diclofenac (Pennsaid and Voltaren Gel). And last, injections might help. They include steroid shots, which provide short-term relief but may cause joint damage if repeated more than three times a year, and, for knee pain, the joint lubricant hyaluronic acid (Hyalgan, Orthovisc, and Synvisc), though it should be tried only if other methods have failed.

Exercise gently

Exercise helps by strengthening the muscles around your joints. And a review of 32 studies found that exercise relieves knee pain as effectively as medication. Of course, exercising can be difficult if you have painful hips or knees. Biking, tai chi, and water workouts provide good exercise without joint-jarring impact. Or consider an elliptical machine or indoor bike.

Consider "alternatives"

They include these measures:

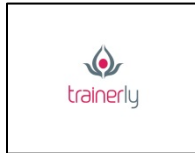
- **Heat and ice. Moist heating pads**, a warm, damp towel, or a warm bath or shower can soothe stiff joints. Ice packs can ease acute pain and swelling.
- **Acupuncture.** A review of 29 trials involving almost 18,000 patients, published in 2012 in the Archives of Internal Medicine, suggests that acupuncture may help some arthritis patients.

- **Massage.** The deep-tissue form of massage got high marks in a 2010 survey of Consumer Reports online readers with joint pain.
- **Healthy fats.** Research suggests that it pays to swap food high in omega-6 fatty acids (such as corn, safflower oil, and meat) for food high in omega-3 fatty acids (including canola, flaxseed, and olive oils, and cold-water fish).

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