Keeping Active with Osteoarthritis

by ANGELA FINLAY

Maintaining Independence and Keeping Active With Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis becomes more complicated as you age. Your chances of winding up in the hospital spike rather dramatically after age 65, and you'll meet more challenges in therapy as you try to rehabilitate and restore mobility. However, as long as you make a few smart adjustments, there's no need to give up on an independent lifestyle.

The keys to a better quality of life with osteoarthritis are prevention and adaptation: take steps to protect your body from further damage, and then create a plan to prevent accidents and maintain strength, so you can continue to enjoy a high quality of life.

The Cycle of Inactivity

The principal problems with osteoarthritis are joint pain and stiffness, but these can quickly lead to a host of other physical and emotional issues:

- **Stiffness impacts range of motion and motivation**. When joints stiffen too much, your natural ability to balance suffers, and you'll find it difficult to bear your body weight. This not only leads to more falls, but also to the *fear* of falling, and that can keep you from doing all sorts of everyday tasks and recreational activities that you enjoy.

- **Physical inactivity leads to emotional strain**. Less social interaction outside the home means less stimulation, and if physical discomfort keeps you from working, you'll likely experience more stress and boredom. In the end, this sense of isolation together with your physical pain can bring on apathy or depression – and that will knock down your activity level even more.
- **Muscle tone and strength diminishes**. When the joints aren't exercised regularly, muscles weaken. The older you are, the more difficult it will be to regain strength, and the weakness will lead to disability. Eventually, you'll lose the ability to perform simple tasks, and you'll have to rely on others to help you through your day.

Since the cycle of inactivity impacts every corner of your life, you need to devote attention to every part of your disease management – your self-care, supplementary care, and education – in order to stay happy and independent.

Next page: staying active and engaged.

Staying Active and Engaged

You don't need to run a marathon each week to keep up your energy, strength and attitude. Regular, low-impact

exercise can decrease pain and actually slow down the progression of osteoarthritis, and frequent stretching will improve your range of motion.

Water aerobics, lower body strengthening (lunges and squats, for example), and yoga are some of the best ways to counteract muscle loss and joint stiffness for osteoarthritis patients. But good joint care demands more than physical exercise, and the wider your focus, the better your ability to handle your health and mobility:

- **Get on good terms with your doctor.** The better you understand your disease and the more involved you are with your treatment, the more likely you'll make effective decisions. Both you and your doctor have a responsibility here: ask questions about your medications, and how to interpret your symptoms and adjust your activities, but also count on your doctor to offer good advice and careful instruction. If you don't feel like you're getting the compassion and attention you deserve, find a new doctor who inspires trust and communication.
- **Use occupational therapy to the fullest.** Your occupational therapist can be your most important ally, so take advantage of their knowledge and expertise. Not only can they suggest the best household aids (such as raised toilet seats and shower bars), but they will also teach you how to protect your joints and conserve your energy. In fact, this type of therapy is a powerful remedy for a number of issues: osteoporosis patients who receive individual and group occupational therapy report less pain, improved mental health, fewer emotional problems, and better quality of social interaction.
- **Learn to cope with adjustments.** While your medical team can certainly suggest some coping techniques, it's really up to you to find a good way to deal with the changes that osteoporosis brings. In some cases, it's a matter of changing your approach to social dynamics, and learning to give yourself a break.

Acknowledging your limitations can be difficult at first, but it's important to accept your new physical state instead of throwing in the towel. For instance, let your family and friends know what has become difficult for you, and think of ways they may be able to help you out. At the same time, have faith in your capabilities; continue to participate whenever and wherever you can, and help yourself by keeping a journal to vent frustrations. A healthy perspective is necessary for whole-body health, so continue to focus on your abilities, but remember that your health matters more than your pride. Reach out when you need to.

Controlling Costs and Commitments for Better Quality of Life

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, and ongoing treatment can bring busy schedules, travel commitments and financial stress. Unfortunately, the mounting costs and energy-sapping obligations can interfere with your ability to care for yourself, but there are a few measures that can save you money and stress:

- **Reduce NSAIDs.** Studies have revealed that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (like ibuprofen, naproxen and COX-2 inhibitors) are a big investment with a relatively small return: patients who rely on NSAIDS for regular pain relief experience little improvement in comfort or joint function, and there's a long list of nasty side effects that can make symptoms even worse.
- **Consider surgery.** It is a big decision, but having hip or knee surgery now can help in the long run. There is an increased risk of complications among elderly patients, but even so, the improvements in mobility and comfort makes the surgery well worthwhile for the majority of people. Research shows that even after 5 years, 75% of patients had no knee pain, and less than 2% still experienced severe pain.
- **Look into disability benefits**. From work-related adjustments to municipal bus passes, you could be eligible for some social assistance that can make your life a lot easier. Check with your doctor, physical therapist, local transportation authority, and employer or union to see if you qualify for some assistance. Even if you find out that you're not eligible for social security, you can likely get some reductions in a variety of services, but you have to do the footwork to find the reward.

Although you may feel helpless in the face of chronic pain, there are ways to stay in control and on your feet. It's important to keep a schedule, use all the resources around you, and reach out for help if you need it. And remember, what you do every day adds up: small, positive steps now can make a big difference a few months down the road, so stick with your osteoarthritis management plan and take time to enjoy and maintain the

activities that make you happy.