

Alaskan

Seniors

# Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

May 2002

The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



**Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger** is a monthly publication of the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA)

## Commissioners

Chair

**Marjorie Hays**  
Soldotna

**Doris E. Bacus**  
Kodiak

**Peggy Burgin**  
Anchorage

**Ella Craig**  
Anchorage

**Alison Elgee**  
Juneau

**Jesse L. Gardner**  
Anchorage

**Bob Gregovich, Jr.**  
Juneau

**Banarsi Lal**  
Fairbanks

**Dan Karmun, Sr.**  
Nome

**Jonathan Sherwood**  
Juneau

Executive Director  
**Lyn Freeman, Ph.D.**  
P O Box 110209  
Juneau, AK 99811-0209  
(907) 465-3250  
Lyn\_Freeman  
@admin.state.ak.us



In addition to National Arthritis Month, May is **Older Americans Month**. The Administration on Aging chose the theme: "America: A Community for All Ages" in recognition of the national community in which we live, and in tribute to the American family which is the strength of our nation.

## May is National Arthritis Month

May is National Arthritis Month. The Arthritis Foundation urges us to take an active role in our joint health now to reduce the chance of arthritis later or to minimize the impact of existing arthritis. Their slogan for the month is "Take Control . . . We Can Help."

To help people take control of their joint health, the Arthritis Foundation is conducting free joint health assessments in May. By completing a quick 12-question quiz, you can determine your risk for arthritis or find out whether you are already exhibiting signs and symptoms of the disease. You may also find out more about local programs and services to help you take control of arthritis and how to improve your quality of life.

For more information about arthritis or a related condition or for a free copy of *51 Ways to be Good to your Joints*, contact the Arthritis Foundation at 1-800-542-0295 or [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org). This issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* focuses on Arthritis with articles provided by Paige Lucas from the Alaska Health and Social Services Arthritis Program.

## Managing Arthritis

Arthritis is a chronic condition that affects many Alaskans. In a 2000 statewide telephone survey 19% of adult Alaskans reported that a doctor had told them that they have arthritis. This represents an estimated 82,000 people. The September 2001 issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* has information about the different types of arthritis, so this issue focuses on ways to manage your arthritis and improve how you feel.

The content of this article is taken from *Handout on Health: Osteoarthritis*, a publication from the U.S. National Institute of Health, National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. While the handout focuses on osteoarthritis specifically, all of the management techniques below can be applied to other types of arthritis. You can access the entire publication at the following web site: [www.niams.nih.gov/hi/topics/arthritis/oahandout.htm](http://www.niams.nih.gov/hi/topics/arthritis/oahandout.htm)

Arthritis treatment has four general goals:

- Managing pain,
- Improving joint care,
- Achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight, and
- Maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

The treatment plans that health care providers give their clients often focus on controlling pain with medications. However, there are many other ways that people with arthritis can improve their health. People with arthritis can enjoy good health despite having the disease by learning self-care skills and developing a “good-health attitude.”

Self-care is central to successfully managing the pain and disability of arthritis. People have a much better chance for a rewarding lifestyle when they learn about the disease and take part in their own care. Working actively with a team of health care providers enables people with the disease to minimize pain, share in decision-making about treatment, and feel a sense of control over their lives. Research shows that patients who take part in their own care report less pain and make fewer doctor visits. They also enjoy a better quality of life.

**Physical Activity:** Research shows that one of the best treatments for arthritis is physical activity. The amount and form of exercise will depend on the type of arthritis, which joints are involved, how stable the joints are, and whether a joint replacement has already been done. There may be exercises that are off-limits for people with a particular type of arthritis or when joints are swollen or inflamed. So, it is important to talk with your doctor, physical therapist or occupational therapist to get recommendations specifically for you and your arthritis symptoms. *See the following article for more information about physical activity and arthritis.*

**Rest and Joint Care:** Treatment plans include regularly scheduled rest. Know your body’s signals, and know when to stop or slow down. This prevents pain caused by over-exercising. Some people find that relaxation techniques, stress reduction, and biofeedback help. Some use canes and splints to protect joints and take pressure off them. Splints or braces provide extra support for weakened joints. They also keep the joint in proper position during sleep or activity. Splints must be used for limited periods because joints and muscles need to be exercised to prevent stiffness and weakness. An occupational therapist or a doctor can help you get a splint that fits properly.

**Pain Relief:** People with arthritis have a variety of non-medical ways to relieve pain. Using warm towels, hot packs, or a warm bath or shower to apply moist heat to the joint can relieve pain and stiffness. In some cases, cold packs (a bag of ice or frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel) can relieve pain or numb the sore area. Check with a doctor or physical therapist to find out when to use heat or cold on your joints. Water therapy in a heated pool or whirlpool may also relieve pain and stiffness. For osteoarthritis in the knee, people may wear insoles or cushioned shoes to

(Concluded on Page 3.)

## Managing Arthritis (continued)

redistribute weight and reduce joint stress.

**Healthy Eating and Weight Management:** People with arthritis who are overweight or obese would benefit by losing weight. Weight loss can reduce stress on weight-bearing joints, decreasing pain and limiting further injury. A healthy diet and regular exercise help reduce weight. Diet is especially important for people who have gout. People with gout should avoid alcohol and foods that are high in purines, such as organ meats (liver, kidney) sardines, anchovies, and gravy. A dietician can help a person develop healthy eating habits.

**Self-Help and Education Programs:** Three kinds of programs help people learn about arthritis, learn self-care, and improve their good-health attitude. These programs include:

- Patient education programs,
- Arthritis self-management programs, and
- Arthritis support groups.

These programs teach about arthritis, its treatments, exercise and relaxation, patient/health care provider communication, and problem solving. Research has shown that these programs have clear and long-lasting benefits.

**Body, Mind, Spirit:** Making the most of good health requires careful attention to the body, mind and spirit. People with arthritis need to plan and develop daily routines that maximize quality of life and minimize disability. It is also important to evaluate these routines periodically to make sure they are working well.

Good health requires a positive attitude. Make the most of things when faced with the challenges. This attitude—a good-health mindset—doesn't just happen. It takes work, every day. And with the right attitude, you will enjoy it.

### **Physical Activity: The Arthritis Pain Reliever**

*Physical Activity, The Arthritis Pain Reliever* is the “tag line” that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will be using in upcoming public service announcements that are aimed at getting people with joint pain up and moving.

Studies show that physical activity can reduce the pain and swelling of arthritis, in addition to the well-known benefits of improving overall energy and health. Physical activity improves health by:

- Strengthening the muscles around joints, increasing the stability of the joints
- Keeping bones strong
- Improving sleep
- Improving mood (mental health)
- Decreasing your risk for other chronic conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and colon cancer
- Improving balance that will help prevent falls
- Improving overall health and fitness.

Unfortunately, many of us are not physically active. In a 2000 statewide telephone survey 20% of adult Alaskans reported **no** leisure-time physical activity!

Experts recommend thirty minutes of physical activity on most days in a week. That may sound like lots of work, but it's easier than you may think to get the recommended “dose.” Physical activity does not mean that you have to run

(Continued on Page 4.)

## Arthritis and Exercise (continued)

a marathon or spend sweaty hours at the gym. Physical activity can be as simple as walking your dog, vacuuming the house, gardening, or walking up a river bank in search of the perfect fishing hole. If 30 minutes at once is too much, you can still get health benefits when you break up your physical activity into 10 or 15-minute increments. You may feel a little more pain when you begin a physical activity program, especially if you are not used to it, but most people who stick to it begin to feel better within four to six weeks.

### *What are the best types of physical activity?*

Check with your doctor or physical therapist before starting a physical activity program. Your health care provider will suggest what activities are best for you, how to warm up safely, and when to avoid exercising a joint affected by arthritis. Generally, low-impact activities performed at a moderate pace work well for people with arthritis. These include walking, swimming and riding a bicycle. Everyday activities such as dancing, gardening and washing the car are also good. The activity should include ongoing movement of large muscle groups, and should make you breathe a little harder and make your heart beat a little faster.

The key to proper physical activity is to listen to your body. If it's been a while since you've done regular physical activity, start slowly and gradually work your way up to 30 minutes most days of the week. Don't overdo it! Remember to always warm up with light stretching, and cool down with 5 to 10 minutes of gradually slower activity. Indicators that you are pushing yourself too hard are that you can't carry on a conversation during the physical activity, or if you feel sudden or severe pain.

It is important to realize that if you have arthritis, physical activity may not be pain free. You should slow down or stop if you feel severe or sudden joint pain. However, it is normal to have tired or sore muscles when beginning a new activity. And if you have arthritis, you can expect increased joint discomfort after activity. *An indication that you may have overworked your joints is that this level of joint discomfort lasts more than two hours after the activity.* If this is the case, ease off the intensity of activity until you feel more comfortable.

### *Tips for sticking with a physical activity program.*

- Do a variety of activities instead of just one. It's more fun and keeps you from becoming bored with the "same-old" routine.
- Bring a friend, family member, or coworker along. The support increases your motivation.
- Apply heat or cold to painful joints before your activity. Heat relaxes the muscles around the joints and helps relieve pain. Cold also relieves pain and can help reduce swelling. Check with your doctor or physical therapist to learn how and when to use heat or cold.
- Schedule your activity or exercise into your daily routine—make it a healthy habit!
- If you do mostly outdoor activities, find indoor alternatives for reaching your physical activity goals for those days when you can't get outdoors. You can do the stretches and exercises you've learned at an exercise class at home. You can substitute your walk with a video workout. Or find at-home exercises on the Internet—just make sure the Internet site is from a reliable source. A few good choices are: the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases—[www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov), the Arthritis Source at the University of Washington Department of Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine—[www.orthop.washington.edu/arthritis](http://www.orthop.washington.edu/arthritis), and the Arthritis Foundation—[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- Try to get even a little physical activity every day, even when you are tired or unmotivated. It's harder to start back up after a break.

Soon a regular program of moderate physical activity should make it easier for you to do all kinds of other everyday activities such as carrying groceries and getting in and out of the tub and car. So get moving and keep moving—you'll enjoy how good it will make you feel!