

Dealing with Arthritis in Winter Weather

Arthritis is a chronic disease that affects many people, particularly older individuals. It is likely that some of the individuals you support may have arthritis. Arthritis can affect people all through the year, but winter weather can make it harder to manage the symptoms. By reading this article, you will learn more about what arthritis is and how to support individuals with arthritis, especially during the winter.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a chronic disease that affects our joints. Joints are the places where the bones in our bodies meet, allowing us to bend. Our fingers, hips, elbows, knees, spine, neck, and lower back are all joints. Arthritis causes pain, stiffness, and swelling in the joints, which can make it hard to move. This may make it more difficult to do daily activities, such as getting dressed, lifting things, sitting, standing, or walking.

Anyone can get arthritis. Some people who are more likely to get arthritis include:

- Women
- Older people (over the age of 45)
- People who have injured a joint or broken a bone in the past
- People who are overweight or obese
- People with a family history of arthritis
- People who have worked jobs that require repetitive movements, such as typing, heavy lifting, or operating a machine

There are different types of arthritis with different causes. Common types of arthritis include:

Type of Arthritis	Which joints are commonly affected?	What are the symptoms?	Who is commonly affected?
<u>Osteoarthritis</u>	Knees, hips, fingers, spine or neck	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain• Bony enlargement (“knobs”) in joints• Swelling• Cracking sensation during movement• Muscle weakness• Instability	Older individuals
<u>Rheumatoid Arthritis</u>	Smaller joints in hands and feet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stiffness in the morning• Loss of energy• Low fevers• Lumps under the skin around joints	Mostly women
<u>Gout</u>	Single joints, usually in the feet or big toe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intense Swelling• Pain	Older men

There is no cure for arthritis, but there are many things that people with arthritis can do to manage the pain and lead healthy lives. As a direct support professional, you can encourage people with arthritis to talk with their doctor about how to stay healthy and manage their arthritis. You can also learn about arthritis yourself so you can help individuals with arthritis with their daily activities.

How can I tell if the people I support are experiencing arthritis pain?

The best way to identify arthritis among those you support is to listen to the individual and be observant about changes in his or her behavior. The individuals you support may be able to tell you about the symptoms they are experiencing, but even if they can't, you can observe changes in their behavior that may indicate arthritis pain. If a person you support is experiencing joint pain, you may notice unusual movements or posture. For instance, if an individual is rocking back and forth, this may indicate back or hip pain.

In some cases it can be challenging to detect a change. The people who you support are relying on you to notice changes in their behavior and their bodies and to ensure that they receive the treatment that they need to get better.

How can I help the people I support who have arthritis?

Early recognition and treatment of arthritis can help prevent pain and permanent damage to joints and bones. Talk to a doctor if someone you support experiences:

- Pain, swelling, or stiffness in their joints for longer than two weeks
- Sudden pain, intense swelling, or inability to move

You can support these individuals by helping them prepare for a visit to the doctor. You can ask them these questions to help them describe what they are feeling in their bodies (symptoms):

- Where do you feel the pain?
- What kind of pain do you feel? Sharp? Burning? Dull ache?
- When do you notice the pain? After an activity? After resting?
- Does your pain come and go? Or does your pain stay all the time?

A doctor may prescribe different ways to treat arthritis including:

- Changes in exercise routine or diet
- Medication to reduce pain or swelling
- Thermal therapy like ice packs or warm compresses to reduce pain or swelling
- Adaptive equipment like a brace, cane, or special shoes to protect joints and help with movement
- Physical therapy, visits to a chiropractor, or massage therapy
- Surgery, such as joint replacement
- Pain management support group to share ideas and support each other

Make sure you understand the treatment plan so that you can help the individuals you support correctly follow their doctors' instructions.

How can arthritis be managed?

Physical activity can play a large role in managing arthritis. Exercising can:

- Reduce the stiffness and pain caused by arthritis.
- Improve general fitness and the ability to perform everyday activities.
- Help maintain a healthy weight.
- Increase energy and improve mood.

You can help the individuals you support to make an exercise plan.

- Choose a physical activity that they enjoy.
- Set specific and realistic goals – such as 30 minutes of exercise each day.
- Start slow and add activity gradually – don't do too much too soon.
- When goals are reached, give a reward!

You can encourage the individuals you support as they follow their exercise plan. When they encounter challenges or barriers, you can remind them of the benefits of exercise and of the progress they have already made.

You can also support people with arthritis by helping them to:

- Ask their doctor about different ways to manage their arthritis.
- Avoid activities or situations that cause them pain by paying attention to their everyday tasks.
- Alternate work periods with rest periods to avoid overdoing it.
- Find devices that make it easier to perform everyday tasks – like opening jars and turning door handles.
- Distract themselves from their chronic pain with fun activities, such as starting a hobby, watching a funny movie or TV show, and making plans for fun things to do and places to go.

How can I help the people who I support manage their arthritis in the winter?

The winter season can bring certain problems in managing arthritis. The cold and damp weather can cause changes in people's exercise plans. Lack of physical activity can cause joints to become stiff. You can support individuals by planning physical activities that are easy to do during the winter, such as:

- Walking indoors, like in a shopping mall.
- Doing household chores, like vacuuming.
- Playing with children.
- Swimming indoors.
- Taking an aerobics or yoga class.
- Listening to music and dancing.
- Using the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Stretching or doing light exercises while watching TV.

You can ask a doctor for more ideas of appropriate exercises and activities.

The winter weather can also cause joints to ache. Make sure the individuals you support dress warmly during the winter, paying special attention to their hands and feet. Some helpful winter dressing tips include:

- Wear loose layers when going outdoors.
- Wear mittens or gloves to protect your hands.
- Wear socks and waterproof boots to avoid getting feet wet or damp.

You can find more information on the DDS Safety Net about dressing for cold and damp weather here: <http://www.ddssafety.net/safety/winter-safety/dressing-cold-and-damp-weather>

Where can I find resources about living with arthritis to share with those I support?

DDS Safety Net has information all about arthritis. Check it out at:

<http://www.ddssafety.net/health/arthritis/understanding-arthritis>

Also, check these websites:

- Arthritis Foundation – Understanding Arthritis
<http://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/understanding-arthritis/>
- Arthritis Foundation – Ways to Protect Your Joints
<http://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/pain-management/joint-protection/joint-health.php>
- Arthritis Foundation – Pain Management
<http://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/pain-management/>
- Johns Hopkins Arthritis Center – Strategies to Increase Your Physical Activity
<http://www.hopkinsarthritis.org/patient-corner/strategies-to-increase-your-level-of-physical-activity/>
- CDC – Arthritis Intervention Programs
<http://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/interventions.htm>
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases – Living with Arthritis
http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Arthritis/default.asp
- Florida Department of Health – Physical Activity and Arthritis
<http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/arthritis/index.html>

The best way to learn more is by talking to a doctor. You can ask a health care professional or your local Regional Center if they have materials that you can use to teach people with developmental disabilities about arthritis.

Where can I go to learn more about different kinds of arthritis?

You can check out this resource on the internet:

- American College of Rheumatology – Patient Education <https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions>