

# Osteoarthritis and Falls

## What You Need to Know to Lead an Active Life and Prevent Falls

*Osteoarthritis is NOT a normal part of aging. Osteoarthritis affects adults of all ages, although it tends to occur more in older adults. People with osteoarthritis are at a higher risk for falling and fall-related injuries, such as broken bones or brain injury. Osteoarthritis does not have to lead to limited mobility and disability. If you have osteoarthritis, learn what YOU can do to avoid falls. With the right information and a positive attitude, you can stay active and have a high quality, meaningful life!*

### Osteoarthritis and Its Relationship to Falls

- People with osteoarthritis experience 30% more falls and have a 20% greater risk of fractures than people who do not have osteoarthritis.
- Osteoarthritis can affect joint function in the hands, wrist, knees, hips, or parts of the spine leading to impaired balance, poor gait, and decreased ability to perform daily activities.
- These symptoms can make someone more prone to falling and fall-related injuries.
- Other chronic conditions such as diabetes, lack of physical activity or difficulty exercising, and certain medications can further increase the risk for falls.



**Falls Free®**

National Council on Aging

## What is Osteoarthritis?

- Osteoarthritis is a common ongoing condition of the joints.
- Osteoarthritis is not due to “wear and tear” on the joints, as was once believed.
- This condition occurs when the cartilage that cushions the joints wears away and causes inflammation or swelling.
- The hip joint and joints in the hand, knee, neck, and lower back are most commonly affected by osteoarthritis.
- As osteoarthritis worsens over time, bones may break down and develop growths called spurs. An inflammatory process can occur that further damages the cartilage. As the cartilage wears away, bone rubs against bone leading to joint damage and more pain.

## What Can I Do?

### Talk to Your Health Care Provider

- A range of treatments can help manage your symptoms so that you can continue to be active and do the things you want to do. Talk to your health care provider about what is best for you.
- Know that most falls can be prevented. Ask your health care provider about a falls screening or assessment to better understand your risk for falling and what you can do to reduce that risk.



*Review common treatments for osteoarthritis with your health care provider to determine what is best for you. Treatments include:*

- **Pain relievers (analgesics).** These may be over-the-counter, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®), or prescription medications, such as opioids (narcotics) and an opioid-like medication called Tramadol®.
- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).** These reduce inflammation, swelling, and pain associated with inflammation. NSAIDs are available over-the-counter or by prescription and include aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac.
- **Corticosteroids.** These are also anti-inflammatory medicines and are available only by prescription. This group of medications can be taken by mouth or injected directly into a joint at a provider’s office.
- **Hyaluronic acid.** This acid occurs naturally in the joint fluid, acting as a shock absorber and lubricant. This acid can break down in people with osteoarthritis. As a medication, hyaluronic acid is injected directly into a joint at a provider’s office.

## Engage in the Right Kind of Physical Activity



- Exercise is considered the most effective non-drug treatment for reducing pain and improving movement in osteoarthritis. Ask your health care provider how much physical activity is right for you.
- The weekly recommendation for aerobic exercise is 150 minutes of moderate-intensity OR 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity OR an equivalent combination. This could include a 30-minute swift walk or bike ride 5 times per week OR jogging, swimming, or biking that gets your heart pumping for 25 minutes 3 times per week OR any combination of these based on your ability and preference.
- If you are not able to do 30 minutes or 25 minutes at one time, you receive the same benefits from shorter intervals of exercise, such as 10 minutes of walking 3 times a day.
- Join a physical activity program or one of the many proven, evidence-based falls prevention programs in your community (see below). The aim of these programs is to strengthen balance and gait, increase muscle strength, and improve coordination and flexibility. You will likely gain other benefits such as confidence, improved mood, less fear of falling, and even pain relief.

## Join a Self-Management Workshop

- The Chronic Disease Self-Management Program has been proven to help people with chronic conditions, like arthritis, manage their health and improve their quality of life. The interactive program helps participants to take control of symptoms like pain or fatigue, increase physical activity, manage medications, and communicate with physicians.

## Pay Attention to Your Diet

- Eat a balanced diet, rich in calcium and Vitamin D.

## Manage your Weight

- Maintaining a healthy weight can help the condition from getting worse and help you stay more physically active.



## Get Plenty of Sleep

- The recommendation is 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night.

## Get Your Medications Reviewed

- Review medications with your pharmacist or health care provider as medication side effects and interactions may increase fall risks. Work with him or her to identify the best medication combination for your health conditions.



## What Should I Avoid?

- Avoid “resting your joints” too much or not moving the joints regularly. Movement helps, not hurts, osteoarthritis. Do not be a “couch potato.”
- If you have more joint pain two hours after exercising than before you started, you’ve overdone it. Ease up at your next workout.
- Don’t let a fear of falling limit your physical activity. Join a program like A Matter of Balance that will help you overcome your fear of falling.
- Avoid exercise programs that put excessive strain on your joints.
- Don’t smoke, and limit your use of alcohol.

## *Community programs that have been proven to reduce fall risks are:*

- **A Matter of Balance:** Eight-session group workshop to reduce fear of falling and increase physical activity.
- **Stepping On:** Seven-week group program that offers older adults proven strategies to reduce falls and increase self-confidence.
- **Otago Exercise Program:** Individual program of muscle strengthening and balance exercises prescribed by a physical therapist for frail older adults living at home.
- **Tai Chi:** Ongoing balance and gait training group program of controlled movements for older adults and people with balance problems.

## *Physical activity programs designed for people with arthritis are:*

- **Enhance Fitness:** Three times per week group program of stretching and flexibility, low impact aerobics, strength training and balance.
- **Fit and Strong!:** Eight week ongoing group program to build lower extremity strength.
- **Walk with Ease:** Six week program completed either with a group or self-directed. This program combines walks with health topics to reduce pain and discomfort of arthritis, increase balance and strength, and build confidence.

For information about these programs, visit [www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org).

## Where Can I Find a Program Near Me?

- Check with your local Area Agency on Aging for locations of exercise, disease self-management, and falls prevention programs. To find your local Area Agency on Aging, visit [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov) or call 1-800-677-1116.
- Visit the Arthritis Foundation's Resource Finder at [resourcefinder.arthritis.org](http://resourcefinder.arthritis.org) to locate helpful resources, obtain key contact information, and learn about local services and programs.

## Additional Information about Osteoarthritis

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Osteoarthritis: [www.cdc.gov/arthritis](http://www.cdc.gov/arthritis)
- Arthritis Foundation: [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- Go4Life: [go4life.nia.nih.gov](http://go4life.nia.nih.gov)

*Support provided  
by Sanofi*

**NATIONAL COUNCIL ON AGING**

571-527-3900 ■ [www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)  
[www.facebook.com/NCOAging](https://www.facebook.com/NCOAging) ■ [www.twitter.com/NCOAging](https://www.twitter.com/NCOAging)