



# PLAIN FACTS ABOUT ARTHRITIS

*A Guide to Understanding and Living  
with Arthritis in Plain Communities*



 **AgrAbility**

Cultivating Accessible Agriculture

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# INTRODUCTION



Designed especially for Old Order Anabaptist community members with arthritis, this booklet explains what arthritis is and how it affects those who have it. It describes the most common forms of arthritis and provides many self-help suggestions for managing arthritis in order to improve quality of life. The booklet also provides information on additional sources of assistance and other educational resources for individuals with arthritis.

The information presented here should not replace the advice and guidance given by your doctor. It is intended to help you better understand arthritis and the role you can play in reducing its effects on your life. If you have questions that are not answered in this booklet, be sure to ask your doctor.



# ARTHRITIS—WHAT IS IT?







Arthritis means “inflammation or swelling of a joint,” resulting in redness, pain, and loss of motion. The term is used to describe more than 100 different conditions that affect the joints and surrounding tissues like muscles and tendons. However, they can also affect the skin, internal organs, and other parts of the body.

Arthritis is one of America’s most common chronic (long-lasting) diseases, affecting one in three individuals. Without proper medical treatment and care, some types of arthritis can cause major disability and deformity.

If you are a farmer, carpenter, skilled tradesman, quilter, or homemaker involved in labor-intensive or frequently repeated activities, you are at increased risk for arthritis-related disability. The impact of arthritis on those who perform heavy labor or repetitive activities on a regular basis can be quite severe because the condition may reduce physical strength and ability to move around and complete routine chores. However, with proper medical treatment and changes in lifestyle you will probably be able to remain active for many years. In contrast, if you wait until joints become extremely painful or deformed, it may be too late for doctors or lifestyle changes to provide significant help.



# COMMON TYPES OF ARTHRITIS





The main types of arthritis include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, bursitis, and tendonitis.

## **Osteoarthritis and Rheumatoid Arthritis**

Osteoarthritis causes the breakdown of the smooth, gliding or lubricated surface of a joint known as cartilage. When the cartilage cushion between the bones is destroyed, unprotected bone surfaces rub together, and the bone ends may thicken and form bony overgrowths called “spurs.” This combination produces pain, stiffness, and deformity made worse by use of the involved joint or joints. Osteoarthritis is the type of arthritis that most often affects workers such as farmers, construction workers, and blacksmiths. It most commonly occurs in the hips, knees, feet, and spine, but can also occur in the shoulders, elbows, finger joints, the joint at the base of the thumb, and the big toe. Involvement of the joints of the legs and feet can severely affect a person’s mobility, while upper limb arthritis can alter the ability to use the arms, hands, and wrists. Although heredity plays a role in getting osteoarthritis, excess body weight, prior injury, and overuse of joints can also contribute to the development or progression of the condition. For instance, every pound you gain adds four pounds of additional stress to your knees and six times the pressure on your hips. For the construction worker, carpenter, metal fabricator, or farmer, the frequent lifting of heavy objects or repeated use of vibrating machinery or impact tools such as hammers can add to the stress on joints and lead to the development of arthritis, particularly of weight-bearing joints. The same is true for activities that require bending, such as milking, handling cement blocks, hoeing crops, or lifting containers of produce.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that can involve the entire body. It is an inflammatory or swelling condition that primarily affects the thin membrane that lines and lubricates a joint. Rheumatoid arthritis causes the membrane to thicken and produce chemicals that damage the cartilage and bone within the affected joint and the supporting soft tissue parts. The condition affects one or more joints and/or other internal organs. If untreated, the swelling can damage joints and cause severe deformity, leading to disability. In some people, rheumatoid arthritis causes tiredness, fever, and general aches and pains.



Rheumatoid arthritis may involve men or women of any age, but it is most commonly seen in females in their 20s and 30s. It often first involves the hands, feet, or wrists, but over time may include the ankles, knees, hips, elbows, shoulders, spine, or jaw. The disease usually affects joints on both sides of the body at the same time; that is, when a joint on one side of the body is involved, the same joint on the opposite side of the body will be affected. Some patients with rheumatoid arthritis have constant symptoms while others have an “up and down” course of bad periods and good periods.





### **Bursitis and Tendonitis**

Bursitis and tendonitis are painful conditions that usually last only a short time and do not cause permanent damage. Bursitis is inflammation or swelling of the bursa, which is a small sac or tissue filled with fluid that acts like a cushion where a muscle crosses another muscle or a bone. Tendonitis is swelling of a tendon, which is the fibrous cord that attaches a muscle to a bone.

A farmer, construction worker, or factory worker may develop bursitis or tendonitis when certain muscles or tendons are stressed, such as by too much lifting, carrying, or throwing, or by constantly gripping and manipulating the reins to control a team of horses. Some dairy farmers develop “milker’s knee,” a form of bursitis that results from repeated kneeling or squatting to attach milking equipment onto their cows’ udders or to milk by hand. Sudden shock to the joints, such as from repeatedly jumping off equipment or standing with knees locked while driving horse-drawn tillage equipment, can also lead to joint damage and pain. In some cases the discomfort becomes so great that certain tasks can no longer be performed and are abandoned. Arthritis is often identified as a significant reason why dairy farmers turn over the milking chores to younger members of their family. This pattern eventually leads to the next generation experiencing the same forms of joint pain.

# MANAGING ARTHRITIS







Arthritis can be managed so that its progress is slowed and its effects reduced. Important to proper treatment and care, however, is the involvement of appropriate health care professionals. Starting with your local doctor, the care “team” could also include: a *rheumatologist*, who is a doctor specially trained to treat those with arthritis; a *nurse* specifically trained in arthritis care; a *pharmacist*, who can explain actions and side effects of drugs; a *physical therapist*, who can show you (1) exercises to maintain or improve muscle strength and flexibility, (2) ways of reducing joint pain, and (3) the best positions for using your joints; and an *occupational therapist*, who can teach you how to reduce strain on joints and maintain muscle strength, and who can provide you with joint-protecting splints and other devices. Such an approach is similar in many ways to how you might treat a valuable work horse that comes up lame. You may call in a veterinarian to assess the problem, provide treatment to the affected joint, check with your blacksmith to see if the horse’s shoes are fitted properly, and make adjustments in the horse’s daily activities. The desired outcome is a horse that is more comfortable and remains productive for as many years as possible. The same outcomes, to varying degrees, are possible with individuals who experience the symptoms of arthritis, if treated properly.

The following sections briefly highlight some things that you might consider doing to manage your arthritis if you have been diagnosed with it by a doctor. For additional information about specific arthritic conditions and/or methods of treatment, contact your local health care professional.

## Diagnosis and Commitment

The first and most important step toward managing arthritis is to get a proper diagnosis from your doctor so that an appropriate treatment plan can be designed—one based on the type of arthritis you have, your unique needs, and likely progression of your condition over time. In many cases, the immediate response to the symptoms of arthritis is to explore various forms of self-treatment including use of over-the-counter pain relievers and home remedies. The problem with this approach is that you don’t know what you are treating, and you may be hiding symptoms that are trying to communicate a more serious

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problem. Knowing what you have is important if you are going to be able to treat it properly.

Find out to what extent your disease will limit your activities and what life-style changes you'll have to make. This isn't easy, but untreated arthritis can lead to very serious problems that could prevent you from working altogether.

Work with your doctor to make sure the treatment program being designed will meet your needs. If it is satisfactory to both of you, then it's important that you commit to following it. If not completely satisfactory, continue working together to find that combination of treatments best suited for you. Your treatment plan, diligently followed, presents the best option for managing the disease so that you can continue to work.

### Heat and/or Cold Treatments

People with arthritis often find that heat and/or cold treatments help relieve pain. A warm bath or shower can reduce morning stiffness and help make movement easier and less painful. A hot water bottle can provide short-term pain relief. An ice pack applied to painful areas often helps to reduce the swelling and pain. Sometimes using a form of heat followed by a form of cold can lessen discomfort. Ask your doctor or physical therapist for other suggestions about reducing pain with heat, cold, or both. Chemically activated heat and cold packs that do not require a source of electricity are available from most local pharmacies.



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## Exercising

To many Old Order community members with arthritis, the suggestion that they may need more physical exercise may come as a surprise. However, many agricultural tasks—even those with only modest amounts of mechanization—have become more sedentary or highly repetitive and involve the use of only a small number of the body's joints. As powered machinery has been introduced into many Old Order communities and more Old Order men go to work in local factories, the level of physical activity has been reduced, leading to less joint movement. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that members of both English and Old Order communities are becoming heavier due to eating habits and changes in lifestyle that result in less exercise.

Depending on the type of arthritis, over time your joints may stiffen, become painful to move, or eventually become deformed. One way to lessen the chances of these problems is with proper exercise that involves all the key body joints. Even if you are a farmer or carpenter and think that you get plenty of exercise, it may not be the kind you need to protect, strengthen, or maintain function in all your joints. Here are some exercises designed for arthritic joints and the muscles that support them:

- Range-of-motion exercises to extend joints through their limits of movement. These help maintain normal joint movement, relieve stiffness, and restore flexibility which has been lost. Stretching is an important part of range-of-motion exercising. Before beginning work each day try going through a series of exercises that extend or stretch each major joint through its range of motion. Repeat throughout the day whenever you begin to feel stiff.
- Strengthening exercises to help retain or increase muscle tone. Strong muscles help keep joints stable and more comfortable. Lifting weights is a form of strengthening exercise. You don't need a fancy set of weights to strengthen joints. Stretching large rubber bands or lifting cans of food can be done to strengthen arms. Small weights can be more beneficial than heavier ones.
- Fitness or endurance exercises to make heart and lungs stronger, give you more stamina, help you sleep better, keep weight under control, and help lift



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your spirits. Regular walking, bicycling, and swimming are examples of these types of exercises.

### **Sleep, Rest, and Pace Yourself**

By learning to treat your body well, you can help it work better with less pain and fatigue. A good night's sleep restores energy and strength and gives joints a chance to rest. Adequate sleep has also been shown to reduce the risk of work-related injuries. If your nighttime sleep is interrupted by joint pain, consult with your doctor and explore a different mattress or use of extra pillows to reduce stress on the painful joint.

For the busy farmer, carpenter, or homemaker, resting during the day is perhaps the toughest part of an arthritis-management plan. In fact, during planting, harvesting, and good building weather, or if you have small children, it may seem impossible. However, daytime resting is very important because it helps restore strength while keeping you from doing too much.

Depending on how active you are and how severe your disease is, your normal routine may have to change somewhat so you work a little less and rest a little more. One way is to schedule rest breaks at various times throughout the day. During very busy times or when joints are especially painful, consider dividing the workload among family members. (But don't give work to children that might place them at risk of injury.)

Conserve your energy by pacing yourself. Learn to tell when you are getting tired or joints are beginning to become painful, and take rest breaks as needed. Not only will you likely accomplish more than by working straight through to exhaustion, but you may also reduce the chances of an injury now and/or pain and swelling later because you overextended yourself.

Other options to consider include scaling back the scope and size of your operation or workload to match your physical abilities or considering the selective use of machinery to boost productivity and reduce the time required to complete

important tasks. For example, if the local ordnung allows, the use of a powered circular saw at a construction site in place of a handsaw can greatly reduce the stress on your shoulder and wrist. Milking machines, used in some Old Order communities, have greatly reduced the stress and strain on many farmers' knees, backs, and wrists that have been historically associated with hand milking. Purchasing hay in large round or square bales can reduce the labor involved in handling hay. You may wish to discuss the selective use of various tools with church leaders to identify those that would assist you in completing essential chores and are acceptable within your community.



## Medication

Arthritis drugs prescribed for you can greatly reduce both pain and joint swelling—if taken correctly. Many of them must be taken every day to be effective, and many must be taken with food. Remember to ask your doctor or pharmacist about side effects and what to do if any should develop.

## Coping with Stress

Everyone experiences stress, including individuals living and working as members of Old Order communities. Old Order farmers have to deal with the uncertainties of the weather; Amish carpenters are pushed to meet the expectations and deadlines of their customers; and every mother, regardless of cultural setting, has more to do than what can be done from Monday's washing to Saturday's preparation of Sunday's meals. If you have arthritis, you could also be dealing with pain, doctor visits, side effects of medication, and medical

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bills. These pressures add up. Unmanaged stress can increase your pain and make it harder to live with arthritis.

Thus, one of the keys to managing arthritis is learning to cope with stress. Here are some suggestions you might think about:

- Consider your arthritis and obligations in terms of your physical well-being. Keep in mind that many aspects of your life, (for example, family illness, crop and milk prices, the cost of drugs, and the weather) are beyond your control.
- Do away with those things that aren't really necessary; instead, try doing a few things well.
- Simplify your life. (Yes, even an Old Order family has room to simplify their lives.)
- Learn how to say no. Don't try to meet everyone's expectations.
- Share your problems, concerns, and/or feelings with family members and appropriate friends.
- Develop and keep a sense of humor. Learn to laugh more—it's great medicine. Remember, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones." Proverbs 17:22
- Protect your personal quiet time in order to place life's experiences back into proper perspective; pray and be thankful.
- Ask for help when you need it.





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## Work Simplification

Most physical tasks related to farming, construction, housekeeping, or other physically demanding jobs can be changed slightly so that the worker with arthritis can perform them more easily. Therefore, for each task, think about how it might be simplified to require less energy or cause less stress on your joints. Can a different tool or piece of equipment be used to complete the task? Can steps be omitted or combined? Is there someone else, such as a family member or employee, who can perform the needed activity? Here are some tips that might help:

- Take a few minutes each morning to organize your day by planning what you want to have done by day's end, and then rank tasks in order of importance.
- Create an accessible, comfortable work place. Use as many labor saving devices and easy-to-grip tools as possible. Arrange tools so they're easy to reach and store. Gather needed supplies and materials before you start working. Transport items by a two-wheel push cart or small wagon rather than carrying them. Raise or lower the worktable, countertop, or work bench to reduce the need to bend or reach.
- Whenever possible, sit while you work to take the weight off your joints. In the kitchen, barn, or shop, keep a chair, stool, or bench nearby so you can rest from time to time. When in the field, at a worksite, or around the yard, bring along something to sit on, or sit on the bed of a wagon or sawhorse to rest.
- Alternate difficult jobs with easier ones. For example, if replacing fence posts, laying block, or digging potatoes is painful to your joints, plan to do these activities in the morning when you have the most strength and energy; then work on easier projects in the afternoon. Alternating heavy and light tasks will spread your limited energy over a longer period of time.
- Combine similar tasks. For example, if you have to repair several items of clothing, try to do all the repairs in the same block of time.
- Do the work that needs to be done in one area before moving to another. For instance, finish all your barn or garden chores before you begin chores in another area.

While these last two suggestions may work for some people, they could invite “overuse pain” for others. You must determine what feels better for you—doing all your work in a block of time for efficiency or changing planned tasks more frequently to minimize joint pain.



### Protecting Your Joints

It’s important to protect your joints against unnecessary stress that can cause more damage. Therefore, learn ways of doing tasks that put the least amount of stress on them. Although protective habits or work practices won’t reverse joint damage, they will help delay or prevent further damage. Here are some work practices to consider:

- Avoid gripping or grasping objects tightly for very long. Gripping creates tension in muscles and tendons that can stress joints. Consider building up with padding the handles of commonly used tools or of levers used to raise and lower horse-drawn equipment. This technique provides more surface area so you won’t have to grip them as tightly. Also, try pushing or pulling control levers instead of grasping them; extend your fingers and use the palm or heel of your hand to do so. There are a wide range of kitchen utensils that now are sold with large or padded handles which make them easier to use.
- Perform tasks using the strongest or largest joint possible. For example, instead of carrying a heavy pail with your hand, carry it over your shoulder in a sling; or use another means, such as a two-wheel cart. Carts or wagons on rubber tires require less effort to move, thereby reducing stress on joints. When lifting, bend your knees rather than your back; use hands or feet to

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slide or roll objects rather than lifting them; and use your hips to push doors open or closed.

- When operating or servicing farm machinery and construction equipment, avoid jarring motions or using body parts to strike objects that shock the joints. For instance, don't use sudden jerks when trying to loosen or adjust something. Make sure the machine has an operator's seat or cushion that absorbs shocks and provides proper back support. Never jump down from a buggy, implement, or ladder. During long periods of operation, take breaks often to walk or stretch. If you begin feeling a lot of pain or stiffness, stop using the equipment or doing the task any more that day; either wait until the next day or have someone else take over for you.
- Maintain proper posture, which helps keep joints and muscles in their most stable position and helps prevent you from hurting your back. Avoid the use of short-handled cultivating tools that require a stooped posture. In some cases, it may be more comfortable to be on your knees than to be stooped over. Devices such as a wheeled seat or knee pads that are used in many factory settings can also be used for weeding in the garden.
- Don't stay in the same position for long periods. Back pain can result if you operate horse-drawn equipment for several hours at a time without resting or changing position. Taking periodic rest breaks to stretch can reduce stiffness and pain, and occasionally shifting position during operation can help maintain circulation. A good Amish farmer would not work his horses for long periods without rest and refreshment, and the same principle should also apply to himself.
- Find different ways for lifting or carrying objects. If knees or other major joints are affected by arthritis, use chain falls, battery powered winches, or come-alongs whenever possible to hoist and move heavy items. For example, you may consider carrying less firewood at a time and make more trips, or better yet use a cart to move the wood to the house. Some Old Order farmers have converted from loose hay or small bales to large round or square ones that can be delivered and dropped in a field or feeder for outside feeding. Battery-powered and small engine-operated feed carts may be acceptable in

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your community for transporting livestock. Skid steer loaders are increasingly being seen in some Old Order communities for use on construction sites to carry small loads and reduce the need for walking on rough ground. There is a wide variety of equipment that might be acceptable to be used or adapted for carrying everything from firewood to calves.

- If you must lift or carry objects, use the proper techniques. For instance, to lift an object from below waist level, first bend your knees, grasp it close to your body with both arms, and then push yourself up with your leg muscles. Try not to lift by bending over at the waist or by keeping your knees straight. This could injure your back. It's better to carry two smaller loads than a large one.
- Be careful getting in and out of horse-drawn buggies. When climbing in, face the steps and climb one step at a time, starting with your stronger leg; when climbing out, face the steps but lead with your weaker or more painful leg. To help you remember—"The good goes up, the bad goes down." Also, to help take weight off your joints, install extra grab bars and/or extra steps.
- Reduce the stress of field work. During certain busy times, a farmer may spend many hours a day on a horse-drawn piece of equipment. If you are affected by arthritis, this can be very stressful. If long hours can't be avoided by involving others or extending activities, here are things that might help increase comfort and reduce stress:
  1. Use a seat cushion to reduce shock to your joints, improve support, and increase comfort.
  2. Modify or relocate control levers to reduce the need to stretch and bend.
  3. Consider the use of an oversized rearview mirror or swivel seat to eliminate having to frequently turn and look over your shoulder.
  4. To get up from a seated position, place your palms (not fingers or fist) on the seat next to your thighs, bend your neck and upper trunk forward as you rise, and then straighten your knees.
  5. When you sit down, do not allow yourself to "flop" into the seat.



- Reduce the stress of standing and walking. If you have to stand for a long time, try to keep one foot elevated (e.g., on a stepstool) to ease back muscle tension; and don't stoop or slouch, causing your muscles to work harder to keep you upright. When walking, let your arms relax and swing slightly to help keep you balanced; be careful not to twist or jar your knees on uneven ground. If walking is difficult for you, consider using a cane or other aid.
- Wear proper, good quality shoes or boots to support your feet and ankles in a correct and comfortable position and to help relieve pressure, absorb shock, and lessen pain. Steel-toed shoes can protect your feet from injury by falling objects or from cuts by sharp edges or blades. Non-slip soles can help you walk safely on wet or uneven terrain. If you have severe arthritis that deforms your feet, you may need custom-made shoes to avoid pressure sores and reduce pain. Your doctor can make a referral for special footwear.
- Use appropriate assistive aids. For example, a simple splint can help prevent deformity in your wrist; a cane held in the hand opposite an arthritic hip will ease weight off that hip; and all sorts of gadgets, from jar openers to shock absorbing hammers, can help reduce joint stress as well as conserve your energy.

For other tips on modifying agricultural work sites to accommodate arthritis-related limitations and useful adaptive aids, visit an occupational therapist, or contact the National AgrAbility Project at Purdue University (see contact information under Sources of Assistance).



# ALTERNATIVE ARTHRITIS TREATMENTS





There are many alternative therapies available for treating arthritis. Some have been shown to be potentially beneficial, while others are outright hoaxes. A few treatments may enhance traditional therapies or ease some symptoms, as has been shown with certain dietary supplements. Other alternatives, including prayer, can influence emotions and mental attitudes—factors that are widely accepted as important to good physical health.

Unfortunately, many people with arthritis have spent much money on unproven and ineffective remedies, such as wearing copper bracelets or magnets or using bee venom. Testimonials can sound exciting, but they don't count as scientific evidence. Giving up your prescribed treatment program for a remedy that hasn't undergone scientific testing can allow your disease to progress uncontrolled, resulting in joint damage that otherwise could have been avoided.

There are certain danger signs for questionable therapies. Avoid any treatment that claims that it can cure arthritis—there is no cure for most forms of arthritis—or is supposedly derived from a secret formula. Do not go to someone who advises stopping or decreasing medication, severely restricts your diet, insists that you pay in advance, has no certificate or license from an approved organization, or tells you to keep your treatment a secret.

When it comes to arthritis remedies, it's important to be an educated—and cautious—consumer. Remember, nothing is as effective in addressing your arthritis problem as working with your doctor to manage it.

# SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE





If your arthritis is so far advanced that you have trouble doing essential physical tasks, you may have to consider changing some of your daily activities. This doesn't necessarily mean having to leave farming, carpentry, construction, or other related work. For instance, sales jobs may exist in your area for people with agricultural or construction know-how. If you need to change occupations because of a disabling condition, your state's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation may be able to provide assistance. Local offices should be listed in the phone book under "State Government."

Occupational therapy departments in most rehabilitation hospitals will help provide information on adaptive equipment and devices. Look in the local phone book Yellow Pages under "Rehabilitation" or "Hospitals" for the facility in your area or check with your county health department.

State Cooperative Extension Services offer or have access to health and safety education resources for farm and rural families. Contact your county Extension office for more information. For the address or phone number, look under the county office section of the government pages of the local phone book.





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Currently operating in approximately 20 states, AgrAbility projects are partnerships between state Cooperative Extension Services and various nonprofit disability organizations. These entities, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provide direct services to farmers or ranchers who have disabilities (including those with arthritis), disseminate educational materials, and conduct local outreach efforts. For more information about this program, contact the National AgrAbility Project at Purdue University, 225 South University Street, West Lafayette, IN, 800-825-4264, [www.agrability.org](http://www.agrability.org).

Other agriculture-related resources include: *Arthritis and Agriculture*, a version of this booklet for non-Old Order/Amish communities; *Gaining Ground on Arthritis*, a 15-minute DVD on arthritis in agriculture; and *¿Podrá ser la Artritis lo que me causa Dolor?* (Could Arthritis be what is Causing My Pain?), a Spanish-language fotonovela for Latino audiences.





## CONCLUSION



Many Old Order community members with arthritis are continuing to successfully function in their homes, on their farms, and in off-farm occupations. And you likely can too *if* you (1) accept the fact that arthritis is a part of your life and (2) decide to fully commit to taking care of yourself. That means respecting your limits of energy, taking your medication properly, getting enough rest, pacing yourself, reducing stress, protecting your joints, and getting the right kind of exercise. If you make—and stick to—that commitment, it's likely you can maintain an active, productive life with minimal pain.

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