

SEPTEMBER IS NATIONAL ARTHRITIS MONTH: How can you better manage and prevent Arthritis?

by Maya Fallows, NSTU EIP Case Coordinator O.T. Reg. (NS)

Arthritis is a condition that affects one in seven Canadians; half of those affected are between the ages of 30 and 60. The word arthritis is derived from the Greek words *arthron* for joint and *itis* for inflammation. With more than 100 forms of the condition, osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis, primarily affecting people over the age of 60. Other common types of arthritis include rheumatoid arthritis, gout, ankylosing spondylitis, fibromyalgia, and psoriatic arthritis.

Arthritis is due to the wearing down of cartilage, the material that cushions the end of bones. The joints most commonly affected by arthritis include the weight bearing joints such as the feet, knees, hips and spine. Other joints that can be affected include the finger and thumb joints.

The key **risk factors** for the development of arthritis include the following:

Age: Arthritis affects a very large number of seniors. Although you can not prevent the years from adding up, you can play a significant role in how your body ages by engaging in a healthy life style and incorporating exercise into your daily routine.

Excess weight: Research has identified a connection between obesity and arthritis. Excess weight adds stress on weight bearing joints, particularly the knees. A 10 to 15 lb weight loss can reduce pain in the knees.

Pre-existing injury or condition: Arthritis can develop due to a previous joint injury, hereditary joint conditions or diseases that affect the joints, such as diabetes.

Heredity: Certain types of arthritis can result from hereditary factors, whether like a tendency to pass on

defective cartilage or a slight defect in the way joints fit together.

Lack of physical activity: Inactivity can worsen arthritis. Many affected with this condition often fear harming themselves with activity and as a result avoid exercise. Others experience symptoms such as pain, stiffness or fatigue and refrain from exercise for these reasons.

While we are not able to modify some risk factors which increase susceptibility for arthritis such as age and heredity, it is possible to reduce the onset of this disease by participating in an active lifestyle that includes exercise to strengthen supportive muscles and maintain joint flexibility. Maintaining a healthy weight will reduce stress on the joint and spine.

Try the following occupational therapy strategies to assist with **coping** with arthritis:

Joint protection: Proper body mechanics and joint positioning can reduce joint stress, decrease pain, prevent deformity and conserve energy. Avoid tight grasps using the thumb and fingers, e.g. pick up items using two hands if possible. Reduce muscle effort and increase strength by using built up handles, e.g. pens, utensils at home. Avoid picking up items with curled fingers; try handling books or files with straight fingers or between palms. Align your work so it is directly in front of you, rather than to one side, to avoid twisting and rotation of the body. Try to always utilize stronger muscles groups in favour of smaller weaker muscles—lift with your thighs and



not your back. Modify the task when possible to conserve energy such as rolling objects rather than lifting or use a trolley when possible.

Plan ahead: Fatigue can be reduced and energy conserved if you are able to take a few minutes to organize your day in advance. Schedule tasks throughout the week to ensure a balance of activity and rest with

a mix of light and heavy activity. Don't pack too much into your days. When possible, only schedule 50 per cent of your day! Determine your realistic tolerance for activity and make sure to take frequent rest breaks. Planning activities in advance can assist in conserving energy like making a grocery list according to aisle can save additional walking, and shopping during non-peak hours can save time waiting in line ups.

Modify your environment: The layout of a work station should be organized so most frequently used items are within an arms reach away and between waist and shoulder level. The same goes at home when organizing items in cupboards—most frequently used items should be placed on shelves between waist and shoulder level. Heavier items should be located at waist level. Dycem, a non-slip material, can be used to sta-

bilize objects such as mixing bowls or dishes. A reacher can compensate for decreased flexibility, i.e. picking items up from floor level. Light weight vacuums, mops, or cookware can decrease energy demands and compensate for weak muscles. A raised toilet seat, bath bench, bath mat, hand held shower and grab bar can facilitate ease and safety for toileting and bathing.

For more information about arthritis or coping strategies for this condition, please contact the NSTU's Early Intervention Program at 1-800-565-6788, 477-5621 (local) or eip@nstu.ca or visit www.arthritis.ca/novascotia.

The Teacher Distribution for the 2009-10 School Year

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did you KNOW?

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Please contact Erin at ekeefe@nstu.ca to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.



[From *The Teacher*, September 2009, Volume 48 Number 1, page 4 © NSTU 2009]