

## **Osteoarthritis and Sex**

*By Michael Castleman*

Has a doctor ever advised: “For your condition, go home and make love frequently.”

Probably not. But for the estimated 20 million American adults with osteoarthritis, the most common form of joint disease, this prescription makes a great deal of sense.

### **The Arthritis Foundation Recommends Sex**

Here’s why: First, “arthritis” is not a disease. It’s a symptom. It simply means joint inflammation, and the soreness, stiffness, and pain that typically accompany it. Dozens of illnesses cause arthritis. If you experience persistent joint pain and/or inflammation, see a doctor.

But quite often your doctor says that what you have is the most common joint condition, osteoarthritis (OA), which is what people mean when they say “arthritis.” According to the American College of Rheumatology, osteoarthritis afflicts more than all other forms of arthritis combined.

Osteoarthritis typically results from decades of wear and tear on the joints. Joints are lined with cartilage, the tough, flexible, shock-absorbing material that keeps the bones from grinding into one another. In osteoarthritis, cartilage breaks down, causing morning stiffness and pain, stiffness after periods of rest, pain that worsens with strenuous use of affected joints, joint swelling, and limitation of range of motion. Most people experience their worst stiffness and aching first thing in the morning, with diminishing discomfort as the day progresses.

## **Risk Factors for Osteoarthritis**

- **Age.** The older you are, the more abuse your joints have taken, so the more likely you are to suffer OA .
- **Weight.** The heavier you are, the more stress you place on your joints, and the more likely you are to develop OA. Today, Americans tend to be heavier than they were a generation ago. In fact, more than half of American adults are now considered overweight. Not surprisingly, rates of OA are rising and the condition is affecting younger (heavier) people.
- **A history of injury.** That knee you messed up in high school sports may return to haunt you as OA later in life.
- **Repetitive tasks.** OA of the hands has increased considerably since so many Americans spend their lives working computer keyboards.

## **Sex to the Rescue**

Years ago, to manage OA, doctors advised minimizing physical activity. But that causes a vicious cycle: The stiffness and pain leads to reduced activity, which leads to more pain, not to mention loss of muscle strength and cartilage mass, which makes it harder to be active. Inactivity also contributes to weight gain, which aggravates OA.

Today we know that one of the best ways to manage osteoarthritis is to be as physically active as your condition allows. Doctors and the Arthritis Foundation now strongly recommend low-impact exercise that gently moves joints through their full range of motion. And guess what does this? Sex.

“Sex is terrific exercise for people with arthritis,” says Palo Alto sex therapist Marty Klein, Ph.D. “It provides gentle, low-impact, massage-like exercise. It moves the major joints through their full range of motion. It releases pain-relieving endorphins. And the closeness of lovemaking, the feeling of being loved, also helps relieve pain.”

Sex involves gentle, range-of-motion exercise, so it:

- **Minimizes pain, reduces inflammation, and helps keep joints supple.**

- Promotes blood flow into cartilage, which keeps it healthy.
- Strengthens the muscles around the joints, which helps support them.
- Releases endorphins, the body's own pain-relieving compounds.
- Helps control weight.

Of course, sex is not the only form of exercise that provides these benefits. *Any* low-impact workout helps manage OA. Cornell researchers recruited 102 people with OA of the knee and encouraged some to take regular walks, and the rest to take anti-inflammatory pain relievers. After eight weeks, the drug group reported no changes in their condition, but those who took up walking reported 27 percent less pain and a significant decrease in use of pain medication.

However, you might wonder: Won't exercise wear out my joints? That's possible, but only if you overdo it with high-impact activities, for example, running or contact sports.

The best exercise for you depends on which of your joints are affected and how severely. But in general, good forms of exercise for OA include: walking, gardening, swimming, cycling, in-pool calisthenics—and sex.

### **How to Incorporate Sex into OA Self-Care**

- Make sex dates in advance. Living with any chronic condition requires lifestyle adjustments and planning. Scheduling sex allows you to prepare in advance, perhaps with other gentle exercise (walking), or by taking pain medication a few hours beforehand.
- Get some other exercise before sex. To feel intimate, many couples like to spend some close, nonsexual time together before they begin to shed clothing. Try taking a walk together. Walking helps manage OA, and it's one of the best ways to warm up the joints for sex.
- Bathe or shower together. Heat soothes the joints. Bathing or showering together not only reduces the discomfort of OA, it's also a sensual way to begin to become sexually aroused.

- Take your medication. About half of people with OA notice benefit from daily doses of the supplements, glucosamine and chondroitin. But an hour or so before sex, check in with your body. If you're feeling achy, sore, or stiff, the discomfort can interfere with your erotic focus and ruin sex. There's no harm in taking some pain medication an hour or so before sex. If you feel only pain, acetaminophen (Tylenol) should help. If you notice joint inflammation in addition to pain, then take an anti-inflammatory pain reliever— aspirin, ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), or naproxen (Aleve). However, acetaminophen may cause liver damage, and aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen may cause stomach distress.
- Move your whole body. Don't rush into intercourse and limit yourself to pelvic gyrations. The type of exercise that's best for the management of OA moves all the joints—the fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, back, hips, knees, and ankles—through their full range of motion. So incorporate whole-body massage into your lovemaking. Roll around together. Move all your major joints. This type of lovemaking not only helps manage OA, it's also the kind of lovemaking sex experts recommend as the most erotic and fulfilling.
- Incorporate sex toys. OA stiffens many people's fingers, which can make loving caresses difficult. Vibrators and other toys can help.
- Make any necessary adjustments. Knees are often affected by OA. If you or your lover has chronically stiff, sore knees, experiment with sexual positions that don't strain them. For example, you might decide to forego doggie-style intercourse that puts you on your knees. Use other positions.
- Check in. During sex—or before or after—discuss the moves that feel best, and the ones that hurt. Over time, develop a sexual style than emphasizes feel-good moves.
- Remain sexual. Some people think: I'm in pain. Pain ruins sex. Therefore, I'm not going to have sex any more. Others think: I'm in pain. But I'm a sexual person. I'm going to make accommodations, and I'm going to remain sexual. The latter approach is what OA experts recommend. Sex provides gentle, low-impact, massage-like exercise that moves your major joints through their full range of motion, while releasing pain-relieving endorphins. In other words, sex helps minimize the pain and stiffness of OA.

- If arthritis continues to interfere with your lovemaking, a sex therapist can help you adjust your lovemaking to minimize pain and maximize mutual pleasure. To find a sex therapist near you, visit [aasect.org](http://aasect.org), the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or [sstarnet.org](http://sstarnet.org), the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

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