

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Living with Pain \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

The diseases that seem to get the most attention from the media are those that are most deadly – AIDS and cancer. Much less is mentioned about diseases that might not kill, but might cause so much pain that, at times, you may wish you were dead. One of my readers asked me to write about one such disease – [arthritis](#). What is it? How can it be treated? (Since this is not one of my areas of expertise, I had to go to the local Arthritis Foundation for information.)

Like cancer, arthritis is a group of related diseases – not just one disease. The word, arthritis, literally means "*joint inflammation*." This means that one or more joints swell up. It is a *chronic* (long-lasting) condition that results in pain and loss of movements needed for everyday activities. Although some people have temporary *remissions* (periods when symptoms are not present), arthritis lasts a lifetime.

Arthritis directly effects 37 million Americans. This means that about one in every seven people has an arthritic disorder, and it hits someone in one of every three families. In fact, my wife has one type of arthritic disorder (osteoarthritis), while I have another (gout).

Although most of us have minor pains that come with aging, there are signs that should lead us to suspect some type of arthritis. If any one of the following symptoms last for more than two weeks, it is best to consult your physician.

- Swelling in one or more joints
- Early morning stiffness
- Inability to move a joint normally
- Obvious redness and warmth in a joint
- Unexplained weight loss, fever or weakness combined with joint pain.

If you go to a physician, making a diagnosis of an arthritic disorder will not be easy. It may take several visits and several tests – blood tests, urine tests, X-rays and/or tests of the joint fluids or small bits of joint or muscle tissue. Accurate diagnosis is essential to prescribing effective treatment. (As with any disease process, the right treatment always works best in the early stages, before permanent damage occurs.) Your physician may refer you to a [rheumatologist](#) – a physician who specializes in rheumatic disorders – those characterized by pain and swelling around muscles and joints.

Any treatment needs to be tailored for the individual – depending on what type of arthritis the person has, how severe it is, which joints are effected, age and activity level. For this reason, medication prescribed for you might not help someone who seems to be suffering from the same symptoms. In fact, it might even cause severe, negative side effects. This is why it is dangerous to share *any* prescription with another person.

Among a variety of drugs that might help arthritis, [aspirin](#) does not need a prescription. One of the safest drugs available, aspirin helps to reduce pain and inflammation in some types of arthritis.

Some of us are confused when we hear some people recommend [exercise](#), while others advocate [rest](#) for arthritis. The dilemma is easily resolved. Arthritic victims need to find a [balance](#) between exercise and rest

that suits their individual needs. The proper exercise typically involves *gentle* movements of various joints through their whole range of motion. Doing these exercises in a warm pool allows the water to partially support the body weight, while the warmth reduces some pain and stiffness. Exercise can be expanded during remissions, and rest might be increased if the condition *flares* (gets worse). A **physical therapist** might be needed to design the best program for individual cases.

If you want more information about arthritis, contact your local **Arthritis Foundation**. (This article only highlights a few points from one of the many pamphlets that are available to you.) Your local Arthritis Foundation might be able to help you in many ways –

- Weekly support group meetings
- Self-help courses
- A water exercise program
- A clinic with a rheumatologist.

Your local Arthritis Foundation can provide expanded options beyond merely living in pain. Contact them now.

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