

# Clothing Ideas for People with Arthritis

Many people suffer the often painful and sometimes disabling conditions associated with various diseases commonly known as “arthritis.” The term is derived from Greek words—*arthron* meaning joint and *itis*, meaning inflammation.

Anyone who has arthritis is likely to experience joint pain and stiffness that can make dressing difficult. Arthritis is associated with aging, is more common after age 40 and almost a certainty after age 80. About 43 million Americans have some form of arthritis.

People with arthritis usually do not need clothing that is designed specifically to accommodate the disease. They usually want to enjoy clothes similar to the fashions that others in their age group are comfortable wearing.

Attractive clothing helps in communication and social relationships with others. Also, it helps maintain feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence, and gives a psychological lift when a person is not feeling up to par.

Careful selection of clothing not only enhances personal appearance, but also fosters independence and ease of dressing. This fact sheet provides a few clothing ideas that may help people who are affected by arthritis.

Two common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. A doctor can determine the kind of arthritis a person has. Less common types such as gout and joint infections may need prompt treatment.

**Osteoarthritis** is associated with advancing age and is sometimes called the wear-and-tear joint disease. Cartilage that cushions joints deteriorates, causing bones to produce lumps or spurs, which cause pain. It is often noticed in hands first and is more serious when it affects knees or hips.

**Rheumatoid arthritis**, more severe than osteoarthritis, affects about five percent of those with arthritis. It is an inflammatory autoimmune disease in which the body attacks itself. In addition to inflammation of the joints, it can affect the heart, lungs, and eyes.

**Juvenile Rheumatoid arthritis** is rare but can cause abnormal bone growth or deformity as the child may seek to avoid pain by avoiding exercise that is necessary for muscle and bone development.

## Common characteristics of arthritis

### Osteoarthritis

- Joint pain during or after use
- Joint stiffness or swelling
- Morning stiffness that lasts about 30 minutes
- Joint pain with weather changes
- Pain symptoms may come and go
- Bony lumps at end finger joint
- Decreased range of motion
- Affects hands, neck, spine, hips, knees, and feet

### Rheumatoid

- Likely to begin between age 20 and 50
- Joint inflammation, pain, swelling
- Can affect any joint, but most often in small joints of knuckles, wrists, and feet
- Overall aching, stiffness after sleeping or time periods without movement
- Affects both sides of the body at the same time (e.g. both knees)
- Joints may feel tender and warm to touch during flare ups
- Hand deformities may result
- Can cause loss of grip strength
- Can lead to loss of mobility
- Pain may be chronic or come and go
- Can affect whole body, including heart, blood vessels, lungs, and eyes
- May cause fatigue, anemia, and low-grade fever
- Symptoms differ from person to person

### Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis

- Affects children
- Causes swelling and stiffness in joints
- Causes fatigue, irritability
- May cause eye inflammation

## Helpful Clothing Features

Choose clothing that takes into account design, comfort, and ease of dressing and life will be more pleasant. Separates and sportswear that can be mixed and matched for variety will give a versatile wardrobe. Following are some helpful clothing features.

- Cheerful colors that complement the individual's personal coloring
- Easy, relaxed fit
- Larger armholes in coats, jackets, and outerwear

- Sweaters rather than tailored jackets
- Front opening closures
- Elastic waistlines or no-waist styles
- V-neck or convertible collars
- Raglan or kimono sleeves
- Velcro® or zip closures with large pull tabs
- Buttons the size of a nickel
- Large pockets to carry keys or other difficult-to-grasp items
- Fabrics that require little or no ironing
- Soft textured fabrics of medium thickness — not thin and slippery
- Resilient knit fabrics that stretch
- Fabrics that provide warmth without weight
- Well-fitted shoes with flat heels
- Shoes that slip on or fasten without ties or buckles

## Clothing Features to Avoid

- Tops that pull over the head
- Back zippers or closures
- Small buttons, snaps, hooks and eyes
- Slick or shiny textures that may emphasize body changes
- Tight, close-fitting garments that can bind to cause pressure on joints

## More Ideas

Look for clothing that makes dressing easier, yet provides an attractive appearance. Some ideas:

Try out walking shoes that have Velcro® grips rather than ties to fasten.

Have buttons sewn on sleeve cuffs with elastic thread, allowing a hand to be pushed through without fastening or unfastening the button.

Have Velcro® strips or spots sewn under small buttons to fasten shirts or other clothing more easily.

Women, choose front-opening bras for easier fastening or wear camisoles of jersey knit without a bra under sweaters or clothing for greater comfort and sufficient modesty.

Women, substitute knee socks for panty hose with pants or long skirts. If circulation is a problem, consult a doctor about wearing knee hose or those styles that have strong elastic at the top.

Wear a tie or scarf at the neckline for a color accent and to draw attention away from deformed hands or changed posture.

Men, wear pre-tied clip-on neckties, or, once a necktie is tied, loosen and pull it over the head so it stays tied and doesn't need to be retied. Hang it by the neck loop between wearings.

Choose necklaces and jewelry long enough to be pulled over the head without fastening.

## Other Tips

Invest in a "reacher." This hand-grip tool can extend your arm reach from 26 to 30 inches and help you pick up items more easily without bending or stretching, whether below or above. Some fold for easier transport and storage.

Use shoehorns with long handles or sock aids (sometimes called stocking gutters) to help you put on shoes and socks, if bending and reaching are problems.

Attach a ring — a plastic curtain ring, key-ring, or a yarn tassel — to zipper tabs to make them easier to grasp.

Get large handled kitchen tools — peelers, knives — to reduce stress on fingers that may be losing grip strength.

Check special needs or home health care catalogs for more ideas and devices.

Maintain a healthful diet, moderate exercise, and proper weight to improve your chances of avoiding pain associated with degenerative joint diseases.

## For More Information

Check Web sites. Several offer sound arthritis information, but be aware of the site sponsors and their goals. Some to check out are:

<http://www.hopkins-arthritis.som.jhmi.edu> — detailed information, referenced to medical literature

<http://www.mayohealth.org/mayo/common/html/arthritis.htm> — advice for patients on coping with arthritis and details about its many forms

<http://www.arthritis.org/answers/> — sponsored by the Arthritis Foundation. Includes information about how arthritis affects youth and adults

<http://www.healingwell.com/arthritis/library> — numerous articles on various aspects of arthritis

## References

David E. Larson, Ed. *Mayo Clinic Family Health Book*, second edition, William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, 1996.

"Arthritis," *Medical Essay, Supplement to Mayo Clinic Health Letter*, Mayo Foundation, Rochester, MN: February, 1999.

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