

## Heart's content

What do physical health, emotional wellbeing, and healthy relationships have in common?



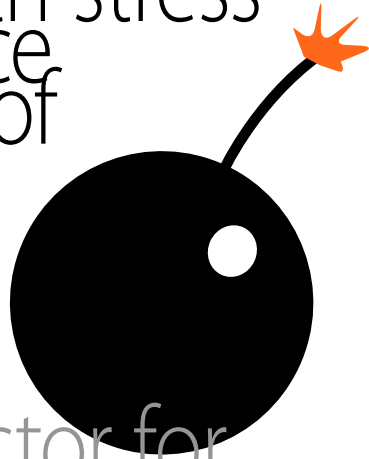
### **The heart.**

And heart disease is linked to arthritis.

Nine out of ten Canadians are at risk of heart disease, but some inflammatory forms of arthritis add to it. For example, people who live with rheumatoid arthritis are twice as likely as the general population to experience a cardiovascular event and they have roughly the same risk as those with type 2 diabetes. Also, heart disease is a complication of systemic autoimmune rheumatic diseases (SARDs). Lupus patients, for instance, are 10 times more likely to suffer from heart attack and 8 times more likely to have a stroke.

For this reason, it is important to make lifestyle changes to reduce the risk.

Look after your psychological wellbeing. Deal with stress to reduce the risk of heart disease.



Stress is a risk factor for heart disease.

**Those living with arthritis** may experience more stress than healthier people due to reduced life quality, disability, and inability to work as much or at all, or take part in their usual activities. Such stress may be unavoidable, so it is important to make a plan to manage the stress. If you are feeling out of control, cranky, fearful, and ill, stress could be further harming your health.

The first step to managing your stress is figuring out what causes you to feel stress and how you react to it. Everybody experiences stress in different ways and it may change for one person depending on how long the stress has lasted. Some people may notice they:

- ♥ Have difficulty sleeping
- ♥ Become abruptly angry
- ♥ Cry suddenly for no reason
- ♥ Have muscle tension (usually in the neck and jaw) and headaches
- ♥ Eat too much or too little (or poorly)
- ♥ Have a rapid heart rate
- ♥ Feel dizzy or light-headed
- ♥ Get chronic indigestion

If the stress is not well managed for too long, it can lead to depression, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. For people with inflammatory forms of arthritis, in particular, heart disease is an even greater risk.

There are many ways to deal with stress. You will have your own ways that make the most sense to you. The following are suggestions that you can tailor to your own needs and interests:

- ♥ Try to **stay positive**. Though optimism is not a cure for disease, including arthritis, research has shown that positive people are healthier and live longer than those who do not. The benefits of feeling optimistic include improving immune system function, regulating hormones, regulating the cardiovascular (heart) system, and improving coping abilities.
- ♥ Look for ways to **be more active**. Exercise controls the risk factors for heart disease (high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure,

and obesity) and reduces the risk of cancer, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and arthritis. A bonus? It also helps to reduce stress and prevent depression. The weight loss that will likely occur because you are exercising more will put less strain on your heart, not to mention your joints. Even a few minutes a day of walking will improve your overall wellbeing.

- ♥ Timeouts are not just for kids. If you are feeling overwhelmed with stress, **take a short break**. Go be by yourself for a few minutes, take a walk, read a book, or do some other positive activity that is entirely different from the thing that is causing your stress reaction.
- ♥ Try to **set realistic goals for yourself**. Trying to do too much could be adding to your stress. One way to avoid this problem is to make lists of everything you want to get done, then figure out which ones are the most important and take care of those first. When you are done, cross them off your list (this visual can be deeply satisfying). If you cannot get them done, then change your priorities (in other words, let go). If you can't get all your must-do items off your list, then try to delegate them to others. Don't forget to reward yourself when you reach your goal.
- ♥ **Eat more healthfully** by adding more vegetables and fruits to your diet and cutting back on processed foods. Healthy foods that are low in sodium and sugar and high in vitamins and minerals will nourish your body and protect your heart.
- ♥ Try to **get enough sleep**. We realize this may be easier said than done. For those of you with depression and stress along with your disease, you may find it tough to fall asleep or stay asleep. Furthermore, the pain that comes with your disease may wake you throughout the night, preventing you from getting a deep sleep. Finding ways to relax, such as taking warm baths before bed may help. To help you manage depression and stress, you may find the January 2011 issue of JointHealth™ monthly useful. Email [info@jointhehealth.org](mailto:info@jointhehealth.org) for a print copy or visit [www.jointhehealth.org](http://www.jointhehealth.org) to read it online.

**Eating well**, keeping physically active, and reducing stress are each understood to be ways to protect your health. You may also know that integrating all of these things into your life will also benefit, but did you know that maintaining emotionally supportive and close relationships with friends and spouses or partners is too? Research has shown that people in relationships in which they feel positive, connected, and comfortable sharing feelings may experience a reduction in their physical disability and pain, and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety.

- ♥ **Maintain healthy relationships**. Relationships can be challenging for you to maintain if you live with arthritis since you may often be dealing with depression, fatigue, and pain. However, healthy and supportive friendships can help you through bad times with your disease and make it easier to overcome some of your day-to-day emotional and physical hurdles.

Visit the Heart and Stroke Foundation website, [www.heartandstroke.com](http://www.heartandstroke.com) to find out:

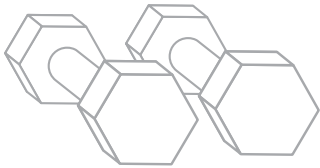
- ♥ The warning signs of heart disease
- ♥ What to do if you are experiencing any of these signs
- ♥ The risk factors for heart disease
- ♥ Lifestyle changes that may help prevent or reduce the risk of heart disease



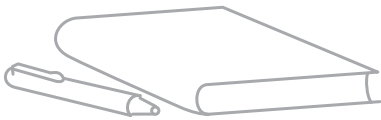
### Tips for getting enough sleep:

- ♥ Limit your caffeine intake, and try to avoid it altogether past mid-afternoon (or four to six hours before you go to bed)
- ♥ Do your best to go to bed at the same time each night
- ♥ Avoid distractions in your bedroom like television or smartphones
- ♥ Unwind shortly before bed, rather than engaging in activities that will make you feel more alert

You may be familiar with these suggestions and tried them. Did they help? Did you find other ways to improve the quality of your sleep? If so, email us at [feedback@jointhehealth.org](mailto:feedback@jointhehealth.org) to let us know. We will share your tips on Arthritis Broadcast Network.



**Exercise** will slow the progression of arthritis and physical decline as you age and cuts the risk of heart disease by nearly half.



In some cases, it may be difficult to tell whether you are experiencing a reaction to stress or a symptom of arthritis. To help separate the two, you may find it helpful to **keep a journal** to track how you react to certain situations and events. If you are finding that headaches occur after writing an exam or after a bad day at work, it may be stress. If they happen after a workout, you may have overdone it. Take your journal to your doctor and together you can determine if arthritis or other factors are at play.

With the journaling, you could go one step further and track the foods you eat, and in doing so you could accomplish two more things:

- ♥ Ensure you are not taking in too many calories and that you are getting enough variety from all the food groups.
- ♥ Find out if certain foods may be contributing to your flares.

*P.S. At [www.heartandstroke.com](http://www.heartandstroke.com), there is a food and fitness calculator that will let you know how many calories you burn when you take part in certain activities.*

# Your heart's desire



**Sex:** something we all think about, but hardly ever like to discuss. Commonly, people with arthritis may experience changes in their sexual lives. Living with a chronic illness can cause fatigue, depression, pain, and lower self-esteem, all of which can reduce your interest in sexual activity. Both you, the person with arthritis, and your partner may worry about causing injury or exacerbating your pain.

If this aspect of your life is important to you, but you are experiencing barriers to enjoyable sex, here are a few suggestions that may help improve your comfort during sexual activity:

- ♥ Try different sexual positions. Use well-placed padding, pillows, or wedge-shaped pillows to help ease joint pain and provide more comfortable position options.
- ♥ Take a shower or bubble bath beforehand to warm up the joints, to help with sore muscles, and to relax.
- ♥ Avoid smoking and limit the amount of alcohol you drink before anticipated sexual activity. Both reduce sexual functioning.
- ♥ Avoid eating within two hours beforehand.
- ♥ You may find it helpful to take a pain medication about a half hour before sex.
- ♥ Have an open discussion with your physician or rheumatologist about any medications that may be affecting your desire for sex or your sexual functioning. Your doctor may be able to offer some solutions.

### The benefits of sex and physical contact

(like hugging) include improving bonds between people and building trust, helping to reduce pain, promoting sleep, reducing stress, boosting immunity, burning calories, improving self-esteem, and improving heart health.

- ♥ Try to find times of the day when your energy is at its peak to plan for sexual activity.
- ♥ Talk to your partner about what you like and don't like, what hurts and what doesn't hurt. You may find the honesty will enhance your relationship, and you will likely be more comfortable during sexual activity because of communicating what works for you. If you are finding these conversations difficult, you may benefit from seeing a sex therapist.
- ♥ There's more than one way to be sexual. Intercourse is not the end all and be all of a sexual relationship. Try to make holding hands, hugging, touching, and kissing more prominent in your daily interaction with your partner. These are just as satisfying, and this kind of connectedness will likely increase both your and your partner's desire for sex if that was waning.

# About Arthritis Consumer Experts

## Who we are

Arthritis Consumer Experts (ACE) provides research-based education, advocacy training, advocacy leadership and information to Canadians with arthritis. We help empower people living with all forms of arthritis to take control of their disease and to take action in healthcare and research decision making. ACE activities are guided by its members and led by people with arthritis, leading medical professionals and the ACE Advisory Board. To learn more about ACE, visit [www.jointhehealth.org](http://www.jointhehealth.org)

## Guiding Principles

Healthcare is a human right. Those in healthcare, especially those who stand to gain from the ill health of others, have a moral responsibility to examine what they do, its long-term consequences and to ensure that all may benefit. The support of this should be shared by government, citizens, and non-profit and for-profit organizations. This is not only equitable, but is the best means to balance the influence of any specific constituency and a practical necessity. Any profit from our activities is re-invested in our core programs for Canadians with arthritis.

To completely insulate the agenda, the activities, and the judgments of our organization from those of organizations supporting our work, we put forth our abiding principles:

- ACE only requests unrestricted grants from private and public organizations to support its core program.
- ACE employees do not receive equity interest or personal "in-kind" support of any kind from any health-related organization.

- ACE discloses all funding sources in all its activities.
- ACE identifies the source of all materials or documents used.
- ACE develops positions on health policy, products or services in collaboration with arthritis consumers, the academic community and healthcare providers and government free from concern or constraint of other organizations.
- ACE employees do not engage in any personal social activities with supporters.
- ACE does not promote any "brand", product or program on any of its materials or its website, or during any of its educational programs or activities.

## Thanks

ACE thanks the Arthritis Research Centre of Canada (ARC) for its scientific review of JointHealth™.



Arthritis Research Centre of Canada  
Arthrite-recherche Canada

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Suite #200A 1228 Hamilton Street  
Vancouver BC V6B 6L2  
t: 604.974.1366

e: [feedback@jointhehealth.org](mailto:feedback@jointhehealth.org)  
[www.jointhehealth.org](http://www.jointhehealth.org)

ACE does not promote any "brand", product or program on any of its materials or its website, or during any of its educational programs or activities.

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Suite #200A 1228 Hamilton Street Vancouver BC V6B 6L2

