

Pain Management Strategies

What is a flare-up and what are the symptoms?

A flare up is when your osteoarthritis is causing you more pain and discomfort than usual. You may have swelling in your joint and have trouble moving it. You may also feel pain, or heat in your joint. A flare up can happen after you injure your joint, do a new activity, or overdo your daily exercises.

How can I take care of my joint during a flare-up?

1. Apply Ice

Putting ice on your joint can calm the pain nerve fibres and reduce swelling. To apply ice:

- Wrap or cover your joint with a towel.
- Apply a gel ice pack, a bag of frozen vegetables, or a bag of chipped ice over the towel.
- If the cold is uncomfortable, add another towel between your skin and the ice.
- Apply ice for 15 minutes. It's normal if your skin is red when you take the ice off.
- If your joint is very swollen, apply ice for 15 minutes every hour.

2. Rest your sore joint

Rest your joint by lying down and putting your leg up. You can rest your leg and stay active by using a cane, crutches, or a walker.

3. Sit on high seats

Sitting on a low seat puts extra stress on your joint. **The height of your chair, sofa, or toilet seat should be 2" (5 cm) above your kneecaps when you are standing.** Here are some ways to raise the seats in your home:

- **Chair or sofa:** Sit on a high-density foam cushion. Sit in sturdy chairs with armrests that you can lean on when you get up or sit down.
- **Bed:** Raise your bed by putting bed blocks under the legs.
- **Bathroom:** Use a raised toilet seat.

4. Make your home joint friendly

These helping aids and tips for organizing your home will make it easier to do daily activities:

- **In the shower or bath:** Use grab bars, a shower chair, a non-slip mat, and a hand-held shower.
- **When getting dressed:** use long-handled shoehorns and sock aids.
- **In the kitchen:** use long-handled reachers. Make sure you can easily reach the items you use everyday. For example, don't put pots and pans on lower shelves.
- **In the garden:** use tools with long handles and plant in raised flowerbeds.

Where can I find helping aids?

Search oasis.vch.ca for Equipment to find a Red Cross Medical Equipment Loan Cupboard or medical supply store near you.

5. Don't push yourself

- **Avoid activities that can hurt your joint.** Such as squatting or kneeling.
- **Know your limits.** Learn how much your body can do before you feel pain. Stop for a break if you need one and don't push yourself.
- **Modify your activities.** Ask yourself: "can I do this chore sitting down?" Use a chair or standing stool to take the weight off your sore joint.
- **Do big chores when you're feeling better.** Leave cutting the grass, washing the floor, and other heavy tasks until your flare-up is over. Don't let your pride get in the way. Ask others for help.

Can medicine help?

Yes. Medicine can help you get over a flare-up and get back to your everyday activities. People with osteoarthritis often find analgesics and anti-inflammatories helpful. Analgesics are painkillers like Tylenol. They have fewer side effects. Anti-inflammatories, such as Aspirin, Ibuprofen, and Celebrex, reduce swelling, helping you move your joint with less pain. **Talk to your doctor about which medicines are right for you.**

Why is it important to get back to my everyday activities?

When you stop moving your joint you risk losing strength, flexibility, and endurance. Doing chores around the house is a simple way to start to move your joint and build up your strength.

How does applying heat help?

Heat will increase blood flow to the joint and relax stiff muscles. **Do not apply heat if there is any swelling, warmth, or throbbing in your joint.** To apply heat:

- Wrap or cover your joint with a towel.
- Use an electric heating pad set on low. This is the safest way to apply heat. To avoid burns, do not fall asleep with the heating pad on.
- You can also use a moist heating pad or a hot pack that can be heated in the microwave (e.g. magic bag).
- Apply heat for 20 minutes only.

Can I overdo it?

Yes. When you start to feel better after a flare-up you may want to catch up on all the activities and chores you missed. Start with small, simple activities and take breaks often. Watch for these signs that you have done too much:

- Your pain is worse
- Your joint begins to swell
- You feel pain for more than 2 hours after exercising.

If you think you have done too much, try exercising for a shorter period of time, taking breaks, or finding a new activity.