

Outdoors health tips from the posse

Hiking With Arthritis

BY MARK RACKAY

Arthritis is a horrible affliction for anyone, regardless of his or her age. I consider myself fortunate I was diagnosed later in life, rather than as a juvenile and have not had to deal with the pain all my life.

In my younger years I committed many mind-boggling acts of idiocy to my body. Everything from going really fast in offshore powerboats, baseball, hockey, and a score of other activities that took a toll on these joints. I am now paying the price for those physical indiscretions.

I was diagnosed with osteoarthritis in my wrists, knees and shoulders about a dozen years ago. Originally, I went the usual route prescribed by the doctors, which included anti-inflammatory drugs and steroids, and a few rounds of physical therapy.

Since then, I changed my lifestyle a bit by losing weight and adding serious exercise. Because of this, I rarely need any kind of medicine, unless I overdo an activity. I will share with you some tips to keep you hiking, backpacking, bike riding and everything else outdoors.

The first and most important thing to do is start with some advice from your doctor. Strenuous physical activity can actually make arthritis pain much worse and further damage your joints, if they are already damaged. People with less severe arthritis may actually reduce pain over the long term by hiking, biking and other forms of physical activity. Activity may help stretch and strengthen your tendons, thus helping to support the joint and reducing joint pain.

Your doctor may also prescribe anti-inflammatory drugs, painkillers, or other medicines to help you. The doctor may also decide that certain physical therapy exercise may be of a benefit as well, so it is most important to start with the doctor's advice.

Once you get the all-clear from the sawbones to hit the trail, start out light. Trim down the amount of weight you are going to carry, especially if the arthritis is in your knees, hips or back.

Take a trip to one of the outdoor stores and try out as many different packs as you can find. Look for a pack that fits you perfectly. The pack should distribute the weight on your back and hips and less on your shoulders.

Next is to take a look at your footwear. Especially with arthritis, you do not want



Having arthritis does not mean the end of outdoor activity, it just means you are going to have to make a few changes. (Submitted photo/ups.gov)

to skimp on footwear. Purchase quality footwear with strong soles and a good fit. I would look for something with ankle support. Consider a pair of quality insoles to go with those hiking boots. Properly fitted insoles help distribute weight evenly along your foot, which helps to ease the stress to ankles, knees and hips.

If your arthritis is not in your arms or hands, you might look into a pair of trekking poles. Moving along the trail with a set of poles helps reduce the stress on your back, hips and knees.

The majority of people with arthritis find that going downhill is more strenuous than climbing uphill. Downhill is worse because of the constant pressure on your ankles and knees. Plan your route ahead of time to perhaps make a loop rather than an up and back hike.

Take a break when you get tired but try and keep the break short. Don't sit down so

long that your joints lock up or your muscles get stiff. You will have to experiment with just how long you can remain inactive without consequence to your joints. If you do rest too long, start out with a few warm-up movements before steaming back on the trail.

It is always a good idea to bring your anti-inflammatory pills and painkillers along with you. If you experience pain on the hike, take a short rest, pop a pill and hopefully you can carry on.

Having arthritis can really knock the bark off of you, but it does not mean it is the end. You can learn to manage the pain and not let them achy bones hold you back. Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director and spokesman for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org •

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