

# 7 Ways to Cope with Arthritis

*Adaptations to equipment and a healthy lifestyle can help manage, and in some instances prevent, this chronic condition.*

Story by  
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If you suffer from arthritis, you're not alone — 46 million adults have the condition, according to the Arthritis Foundation. And because of the physically demanding nature of farm and ranch work, arthritis can be especially bothersome to those who have worked in agriculture all their life. Experts estimate one-third of all U.S. farmers and ranchers have some form of arthritis that inhibits them from completing daily tasks.

"Farming is a very physical occupation, and that puts farmers at high risk for developing arthritis, especially in the knees and hips," Meg Teaford says. "Plus, the farming population is older than the general population, adding another risk factor."

Teaford is an assistant clinical professor in occupational therapy at Ohio State University's School of Allied Medical Professions. She teaches courses on aging and, through a grant from the Ohio Department of Health, recently worked with occupational therapy graduate students to develop educational materials directed toward farmers and ranchers with suggested ways to prevent and manage arthritis.

"There are things farmers can do to protect their joints and manage, or possibly prevent, arthritis," Teaford says, and adds, "Just because someone

has arthritis doesn't mean they can't continue to do farm work. But with arthritis you have to be purposeful about your work and take care of your body."

## Protect your joints

Arthritis tends to affect most people in their hands, knees and hips because these are the joints that take the most pressure. Thus, strategies that minimize pressure on these points may help reduce the pain and stiffness associated with arthritis. Teaford offers these seven strategies:

**1.** Have a purposeful exercise plan. Teaford recognizes that farmers and ranchers do get exercise in the physical work they do every day, but she says a "purposeful" exercise plan includes stretching and warming up, strength and endurance exercises, and low-impact weight-bearing activity that can benefit the joints, such as walking or swimming.

**2.** Maintain a healthy weight. "Extra weight means more stress on hips and knees," Teaford points out. According to the Arthritis Foundation, losing just 10 pounds (lb.) relieves 40 lb. of pressure on knees.

**3.** Look for ways to simplify body movements. With a little thought, Teaford says, farmers can adapt simple techniques

that help minimize stress on the body. For example,

- Adding a drop-down step with non-slip material and attaching an extra handle to farm machinery can help with getting on and off safely.
- Installing suspension seats or seat cushions with lumbar support and adjustable armrests in tractors may absorb shock and protect joints.
- Additional mirrors could be added to the inside and outside of the tractor cab to decrease the need to twist to see what is happening behind you.
- Using a wheelbarrow or all-terrain vehicle (ATV) for moving heavy objects can minimize pressure on your knees and back.
- Add padding to gears and handles. Building up tractor knobs, levers, small tools or handles (such as those on a cattle chute) with foam or duct tape can make them easier to grasp, especially if your hand strength is limited, Teaford says. Adding an extender to a handle can also change the leverage and make it easier to use.

**4.** Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Teaford says a healthy diet can also minimize the effects of arthritis. This includes keeping bones healthy with adequate calcium (Ca). The recommended daily allowance is 1,200 milligrams (mg). If you take a

calcium supplement, she suggests also taking vitamin D, which helps with calcium absorption.

**5.** Don't smoke. Research by the Arthritis Foundation has found a correlation between smoking and arthritis, so quitting may help reduce or prevent arthritic symptoms.

**6.** Consider alternatives. Teaford says many of the traditional treatment methods for arthritis can be helpful in improving mobility. These may include hot and cold packs on the affected joints, anti-inflammatory medication, or wearing a brace that helps prevent inflammation around joints. Another suggestion Teaford makes is to build in short breaks to move around, especially when you are sitting in a tractor for a long period of time.

**7.** Consult an occupational therapist. As a final piece of advice, Teaford suggests farmers and ranchers consider visiting with an occupational therapist to learn more about ways to protect their joints. She says, "It's a matter of analyzing a task to see how it can be simplified and made easier, so you are not doing as much lifting or reaching. That's where an occupational therapist might be helpful in making suggestions."

## Handle modifications

Using built-up handles on tools can be beneficial for individuals with decreased grip strength, hand pain or numbness while gripping objects. Inexpensive ways to build up handles include:

- Wrap a washcloth around the handle and secure it with tape.
- Wrap an ACE® self-adhesive bandage around the handle until desired thickness is achieved.
- Wrap craft foam or foam pipe insulation around the handle and secure it with tape.
- Wrap pieces of rubber hose around the handle and secure it with tape.

Source: *The Ohio State University Master's of Occupational Therapy program.*



Tools with added padding can be easier to grasp, especially if hand strength is limited.



Extending a tool's handle can improve leverage, making it easier to use.

[PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEG TEAFORD, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ALLIED MEDICAL PROFESSIONS]

## Details from a doctor

The life of a cowboy or cowgirl can take its toll on the body over time. The aches and pains of a bad knee, hip or back can get to be so crippling that it prevents older folks from enjoying ranch life. Often, many people consider knee or hip replacements. Here, an orthopedic surgeon shares what to expect if you are considering such a surgery.

Lew Papendick, one of several orthopedic surgeons at the Black Hills Orthopedic & Spine Center in Rapid City, S.D., says pain relief should be the primary reason patients elect to do a knee or hip replacement surgery.

“That is why so many people are pleased after a joint replacement, because their pain is greatly reduced or eliminated. It may take four to six months of physical therapy after the surgery to get to that point, but the success rate with these surgeries is well over 90%,” he says.

In his orthopedic practice, Papendick has specialized in the care of knee and shoulder pathology and works with a variety of patients, from young athletes and rodeo cowboys to the elderly and everyone in between. He often treats torn ligaments, arthritic joints, total joint arthroplasty and torn rotator cuffs in the shoulder.

When and why should someone consider a joint replacement surgery? Papendick says it comes down to the level of pain in the joint and if regular medicine has failed to alleviate that pain. Particularly for knee or hip surgeries, he says individuals who have to use a cane or crutch, have difficulty going down steps, and/or have a walking tolerance of three blocks or less may be good candidates.

There are some considerations for individuals who may not make good joint replacement candidates, such as if there’s been an infection in the joint from a previous trauma, or if someone has a poor heart or other health condition that would increase the risk of surgery.

Age is also a factor. Papendick says joint replacements for someone in their 40s or younger is a fine line. “The chance that the joint will loosen and wear out over time is greater with younger patients, so they may eventually need a second surgery down the road,” he says. But, he adds, if their activity level is limited greatly due to arthritic pain, then it’s worth considering the surgery.

He reiterates that the surgery is complex, but the success rate is high. “Total joint arthroplasty is a major surgery,” he explains. “However, the material used to make the joint replacements and the understanding of the procedures to recreate anatomical movements has really improved in the last 20 years. So the long-

term results are better.”

Papendick explains that, on average, patients stay in the hospital for three nights after having surgery and go home on the fourth day. They then continue with physical therapy (usually as an outpatient) two to three times per week for a couple of months. Knee and hip patients may use

crutches for two to three weeks and then a cane for a brief time after that.

“The key to success in these surgeries is to have a good interaction with the surgeon,” he says. “There needs to be good communication between the patient and doctor, and the patient has to elect to want the surgery.”