

How To *ease arthritis pain*

May is National Arthritis Month **Ease Arthritis Pain, Caregiving**

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Taking care of others' needs, no matter how close the bond, takes physical and emotional energy. Caregivers can wear out or, given the added stresses, wish to abandon ship, said Kerri Parsons, Kansas State University Research and Extension specialist on aging.

With short-term caregiving – seeing a family member or friend through recovery from accident or surgery, for example – there usually is the promise that the added responsibility will end. That's not always the case for long-term caregiving, particularly when care is needed to relieve symptoms of severe chronic illness, said Parsons.

Situations where the friend or relative has arthritis is a case in point, particularly since the number of arthritis sufferers is growing. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has estimated that as many as 70 million people suffer from arthritis. The disease often is associated with aging, but is not limited to older populations. It's also not always obvious to others. Arthritis sufferers may look fine, but suffer from painful inflammation and swelling that can be debilitating.

While pain management is a medical issue, it also can become an issue between a caregiver and his or her patient. The ability to manage the pain successfully, to achieve a 'comfort zone,' can mean the difference between a good day and one that isn't, said Parsons, who also is a psychologist.

Arthritis can flare up. The inflammation can cause swelling, increased pain, and fatigue. The fact that joints become 'locked down' or 'frozen' can make simple tasks like bathing, getting

dressed, or holding a coffee cup difficult, she said.

The loss of independence can stress the relationship between a caregiver and patient. And, when a caregiver is a spouse or partner, the disease and responsibilities of caregiving also can compromise a couple's level of intimacy and sociability, Parsons said.

"Caregivers and their patients often learn to live in the moment, to take advantage of the good days or times," said Parsons, who offered these tips for patients suffering from arthritis and their caregivers:

***Learn about the disease.** Print information is available from medical professionals and from foundations, such as the Kansas Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation [316-263-0116, or if outside the Wichita area, 800-362-1108].

***When possible, accompany the patient to medical appointments;** listen intently, ask questions, and take notes.

***Keep track of days when pain and inflammation increase, and note potential triggers.** For example, has the arthritis sufferer done anything unusual that day? Stressed joints? Eaten unusual foods? Become overly tired? Forgotten to take medicine on time?

"Journaling provides a written record that can help identify patterns. It also can provide stress relief for the caregiver and the patient," Parsons said.

***Measure pain on a scale of one to 10;** when the inflammation and subsequent pain increases, follow more aggressive prescribed pain management procedures before the pain becomes unbearable.

***Schedule relief,** particularly when caregiving becomes – or seems to become – 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Parsons said.

"Keep a running list of people who can be called to provide a meal, help with transportation or

otherwise relieve the caregiver. In families where constant care is essential, don't be shy about asking for help," she said.

"The reality is that almost everyone can do something. Even children can help: younger children can hold a book for an arthritic who no longer can; older children can read to the patient, or help with other must-haves, like errands and meal preparation," Parsons said.

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