



## **Sue Ann Says: Don't Let Arthritis Control Your Life**

Three-year-olds have an unfair advantage. They're faster – and far more dexterous – than their grandmas. Just a few years ago, I was up to the task. But rheumatoid arthritis has left me with achy, rickety joints. Although it was really limiting my everyday activities, I assumed there wasn't too much I could do about it. Everyone gets arthritis when they get older, right?

Justina Tseng, MD, set me straight about the many misconceptions regarding arthritis. Dr. Tseng is a rheumatologist, founder of Lakeshore Rheumatology, LLC, and also sits on the Board of Directors of the Arthritis Foundation-Wisconsin Chapter. She told me that arthritis can happen to anyone, at any age, even children. Of the more than 46 million U.S. adults diagnosed with arthritis, almost two-thirds are women. But Dr. Tseng says there is plenty women can do to treat arthritis – and in some cases even prevent it.

### **Arthritis basics**

I was surprised to learn that arthritis (which means “joint inflammation”) is a general term. In fact, there are more than 100 different forms of arthritis. Some common examples include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout and psoriatic arthritis. Depending on the type and severity of the arthritis, symptoms can occur gradually or suddenly. Usually pain, stiffness and/or inflammation can be symptoms of arthritis. Arthritis is the leading cause of disability in the U.S.

Dr. Tseng explained that some kinds of arthritic conditions are caused by “wear and tear” which effect cartilage. Other kinds of arthritis are caused by autoimmune dysfunction leading to uncontrolled inflammation affecting the joint. Examples include psoriatic and rheumatoid arthritis. Depending on the cause, treatments may vary.

Diagnosis can be tricky because so many conditions can cause joint pain. Risk factors also vary. For example, women who are postmenopausal and/or taking certain blood pressure medications have shown increased risk for developing gout, an arthritic condition usually associated with men. Doctors will base their diagnosis on your age and gender, symptoms, physical exam, family history, diet, physical activities, and other information. Dr. Tseng advises her patients to keep

a diary of joint pain, noting where and when it occurs, and its severity and duration.

### **Osteoarthritis (“Wear & Tear” or Degenerative Arthritis)**

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis, affecting about 27 million Americans. It is a degenerative joint disease, usually caused by “wear and tear” of the cartilage and bones around the joints. As the cartilage deteriorates, bone on bone contact causes pain that severely limits daily activities. Osteoarthritis often occurs in the weight-bearing joints. Risk factors include previous injury or repetitive strain on the joint. Pain usually is worse at the end of the day, and with weight-bearing activities.

“Early detection is important because treatment can slow the progression of cartilage wear and tear, and control symptoms of pain,” Dr. Tseng emphasized.

### **Rheumatoid arthritis**

Women have men beat by 2 ½ to 1 when it comes to rheumatoid arthritis. Joint pain, stiffness and swelling, especially first thing in the morning, led me to my doctor for a diagnosis. I learned that rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune, inflammatory disease that affects 1.3 million Americans.

Rheumatoid arthritis often occurs symmetrically. For instance, I have it in the fingers and wrists of both my left and right hands. Like many people with this condition, my pain improves as the day goes on.

There is no definitive way to predict who will get rheumatoid arthritis, Dr. Tseng told me, and no way to prevent it, but research is underway to identify risk factors. Until that day comes, early diagnosis is vital. Without treatment, inflammation leads to permanent damage to the joint and bone, often leading to deformities. Rheumatoid arthritis also can cause other medical complications. “If started early, medications to control the autoimmune and inflammatory process can slow or even halt progress of the disease,” Dr. Tseng said.

### **Managing arthritis**

“Treating arthritis is not just about treating the pain, but preventing long-term damage to joints and other parts of the body,” Dr. Tseng emphasized. Your doctor will tailor a care plan for your specific condition. Medications, nutritional supplements and physical therapy can help.

Dr. Tseng’s tips to help decrease pain and improve function:

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat a healthy diet, especially foods rich in natural antioxidants and omega 3 fatty acids, as these help with inflammation.

- Stay active but be mindful of your limitations. Water pool exercise, stretching, and static exercise can help maintain muscle and range of motion.
- Cut down on repetitive motion and use household gadgets to reduce impact on joints.
- Stick to a regular sleep schedule.
- Avoid prolonged sun exposure, which can trigger flare-ups of autoimmune conditions.

My grandkids might run circles around me, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let my arthritis do the same. If pain or inflammation is slowing you down, please see your doctor. There have never been more or better options to manage arthritis. So grab hold of life. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson  
*Founder & President*  
*Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation*

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

### **Resources**

Lakeshore Rheumatology  
[www.arthritiswellness.com](http://www.arthritiswellness.com)

Arthritis Foundation  
[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
[www.cdc.gov/arthritis](http://www.cdc.gov/arthritis)