



**ABLEDATA, Your Source for
Assistive Technology Information**

Informed Consumer Guide for People with Arthritis

February, 2001

Introduction

Arthritis affects more than 43 million Americans, and it is one of the most common forms of disability today. Although arthritis can be a painful and disabling condition, there are many devices that can make life easier. The objective of this Informed Consumer Guide is to introduce you to resources about arthritis and to adaptive devices that may help you do your daily activities with greater comfort.

Note: In order to illustrate the features of general product types, this guide mentions and describes several specific products. References to any company or product does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement of that company or product by ABLEDATA or the U.S. Department of Education. We encourage you to be a smart consumer. Find out as much as possible about the products that might fit your needs, and be an active participant in the selection of any product that you use.

General Resources on Arthritis

The first place you'll want to go for general information about arthritis is the Arthritis Foundation. Their address is:

Arthritis Foundation
1330 West Peachtree Street
Atlanta, GA 30309
Tel: 404/872-7100

Arthritis and Assistive Technology Information on the Internet

If you have Internet access, check out the Arthritis Foundation's website at www.arthritis.org. This site also offers a number of links to other websites that deal with the medical aspects of arthritis.

Two additional resources devoted to arthritis and related conditions are www.arthritis.about.com (formerly miningco.com) and The Better Living Spa at www.arthritisconnection.com. The Better Living Spa website provides practical hints for making everyday chores easier, either through using alternative methods or through using simple assistive devices. For example, recommendations include "Avoid buying large containers or packages of food. Keep them manageable in size for easy lifting and maneuvering." Similar suggestions are available throughout the site. While many recommendations reflect common sense, others may provide new techniques or ideas that you had not previously considered.

Interestingly, most of the arthritis-related websites we have found do not provide much information about assistive devices. However, numerous on-line catalogs provide good information about using assistive devices when you have arthritis. Some on-line catalog resources include:

- ◆ Accessibility Products Online at www.accesstoday.com
- ◆ Adaptive Mall at <http://adaptivemall.com> (primarily for children and young adults)
- ◆ Aids to Daily Living at www.dme.com
- ◆ ADI-Assistive Devices Inc. at www.geocel.com/adi/home.htm
- ◆ Barrier-Free Products at www.barrier-free.com/index.html
- ◆ CEU Consumer Product Catalog at www.ceuunlimited.com
- ◆ Comfort House online shopping at www.comforthouse.com
- ◆ Daily Living Products at www.ca.com.au/daily (this site is Australian)
- ◆ Dynamic Living at www.dynamic-living.com/alternatives.htm
- ◆ Independent Living Products at www.webjunkie.com/iponline/index.html

- ◆ Maddak, Inc. at www.maddak.com
- ◆ MedQue at www.medque.com
- ◆ North Coast Medical at www.ncmedical.com
- ◆ SENIORSTORE at www.seniorstore.com
- ◆ The Boulevard - Assistive Devices for Daily Living at www.blvd.com/adl.html
- ◆ The Wright Stuff at www.thewrightstuff.com
- ◆ Unlimited Solutions at www.unlimited.on.ca (a Canadian company)

Some of these companies such as Maddak, Inc., North Coast Medical, and The Wright Stuff also offer print catalogs for those who prefer mail order shopping.

A good, “plain English” list of products for daily living needs is available at www.ndipat.org/dodads/ddtoc.htm provided under the heading of “Doodads, Gadgets and Thingamajigs.” This list describes everyday products that are available to make life easier for people with many kinds of disabling conditions, including arthritis.

The ABLEDATA database (www.abledata.com), sponsored by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), contains information on more than 18,000 currently available products for people with disabilities. ABLEDATA is not a catalog. Rather, its database provides objective information on products for people with disabilities. Once you know the kinds of products you need, you can search ABLEDATA to get descriptions of those products, as well as information about their availability. For many products, links are provided directly from the database to the manufacturer or distributor’s website. All product information also includes company contact information. Those without Internet access may call the ABLEDATA project at 1-800-227-0216 and a staff member will search the database. The ABLEDATA office is open Monday through Friday except Federal holidays from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Eastern Time.

Recent Arthritis Books

Numerous books have been written about arthritis, and several of them address ways to make it easier to live with arthritis. Some recently published books include:

- *250 Tips for Making Life with Arthritis Easier*, by Shelley Peterman Schwarz, Longstreet Press, May 1997, 128 pages, paperback.

- *50 Ways to Cope with Arthritis*, by Consumer Guide, Publications International, September 1996, hardcover.

- *The Arthritis Sourcebook, 2nd edition*, by Kathy Cochran Angel (Contributor) and Earl J. Brewer, Lowell House, July 1998, 240 pages, paperback.

- *Arthritis of the Hip and Knee: The Active Person’s Guide to Taking Charge*, by Ronald J. Allen, S. David Stulberg, Victoria Anne Brander, Pat Lee, and David S. Stulberg, Peachtree Publishers, May 1998, 256 pages, paperback.

- *Arthritis 101: Questions You Have, Answers You Need*, by The Arthritis Foundation, Longstreet Press, May 1997, 176 pages, paperback.

- *Living with Arthritis: Successful Strategies to Help Manage the Pain and Remain Active*, by Harry M.D. Shen, Cheryl Solimini, and Kent Humphreys (illustrator), Plume, August 1993, 186 pages, paperback.

- *Living with Arthritis: A Practical Guide for All Canadians*, by Roderick Jamer, Whitecap Books, August 1996, paperback.

Getting Started

Think through a typical day in your life. How does your arthritis affect your ability to carry out your normal activities? Do you have trouble bathing? Getting dressed? Getting around the house? Fixing meals? Going to the doctor? Make a list of your needs to identify the kinds of assistance you might require.

Outlined below are some of the major tasks with which people with arthritis often report having difficulty. For each type of task, we describe some of the devices available to help perform those tasks.

Grasping, Holding, or Opening Things

Arthritis often affects the joints of the hands, making the act of grasping things difficult. You may find it hard to hold a fork, use your keys, hold a pen or pencil, apply make-up, hold the phone, open a jar, turn a door knob or faucet, open a medicine bottle, or do other tasks around the house that require grasping. Because of this very common effect of arthritis, there are literally hundreds of devices available to help. For example, eating utensils can be modified by building up or lengthening handles. Other devices help with

gripping to open bottles, turn on a light switch, open a door, or even set an oven. Plastic handles that loop through the handles of plastic grocery bags aid in grasping them and distribute the weight, making them easier to carry.

If you have a cast on, you may want to invest in cast protectors. An inexpensive alternative to a commercial cast protector is a plastic trash bag sealed to the skin with package sealing tape. In addition, a towel or washcloth around the arm or leg near the sealed opening will absorb any moisture that might seep in.

Reaching

One of the most useful all-purpose devices on the market is a reacher. Reachers consist of a long shaft with a device at the end to grasp a lightweight object. Made of aluminum, lightweight wood, or other lightweight materials, one end is operated by the user, and the other end has a “pincher” or “jaw” that grabs onto an object. Some jaws are single serrated claws, while others have arms with suction cups on each side. Most reachers have squeeze triggers to operate the jaws. Other reachers have “toggle” triggers and are designed specifically for people with severe arthritis, spinal cord injuries, or other conditions that affect hand function.

Carrying Things

If you use a walker or a wheelchair, you do not have your hands free to carry a package. Attaching a basket, tray, bag, backpack, or hook to a walker or wheelchair will help you carry things. Other options include portable shopping carts help carry groceries to or from the car or can be used around the house to transport laundry or other items. Lightweight rolling carts with shelves or bins also help in moving things around the house, reducing the number of trips needed to get things done.

Sitting and Standing Up

Devices can ease the struggle to get in and out of a chair, get on or off the toilet, and do other activities that involve sitting and standing up. For instance, by pulling a lever on a portable seat lift cushion, you activate a spring lift in the cushion to raise you to a standing position from a chair. Powered recliner chairs are available which can also raise the user to a standing position.

In the bathroom, safety frames for the toilet provide arms for stability when sitting or standing. Raised toilet seats

also make using the toilet safer and easier and can be used with or without the safety frame. Another alternative is installing a tall toilet. A relatively new product called the Toilevator is a riser that fits between the base of the toilet and the floor, elevating an existing toilet.

Getting Around

Walkers, scooters, and wheelchairs may be needed if you have arthritic legs. Walkers are available in a variety of styles, ranging from simple four-legged aluminum frames to three- and four-wheeled models with colorful frames, seats, baskets, and handbrakes. Your doctor or therapist can help determine which type of walker best fits your lifestyle and physical needs.

As with walkers, there are many models and styles of wheelchairs and scooters available. Manual wheelchairs range from very basic models to sleek lightweight sports models. Powered wheelchairs are available for those who do not have the strength or stamina to wheel themselves. These chairs can be simple transportation or they can be equipped with sophisticated controls and electronics, depending on your needs. Scooters provide a less expensive alternative to powered wheelchairs and have a less medical or institutional appearance than some wheelchairs. Scooters are available in three- and four-wheeled models equipped with a variety of features and accessories. Models are available for outdoor use only, for indoor use only, or for use in both settings. Again, consulting with your physician or therapist will help you decide which type of mobility aid is suitable for you.

ABLEDATA also has publications available to help you with your selection. Included are individual fact sheets on manual wheelchairs, powered wheelchairs, and scooters. Also available is our Informed Consumer Guide to Wheelchair Selection.

Going Up and Down Stairs

Going up and down stairs is possible even if you use a wheelchair. A lift can be attached to an indoor or outdoor stairway. Many of the lifts can be folded for storage when they are not in use. Some lifts require you to transfer from your wheelchair to a built-in chair, while others lift both the wheelchair and the user. In-home elevators are also an option.

Bathing and Grooming

Several devices are available to make bathing and grooming easier for people who have arthritis. For individuals who have difficulty using their arms or hands, back scrubbers, bath brushes, combs with long handles, and hairbrushes with hand straps can be helpful. Wash mitts with pockets to hold soap might be useful for those with arthritis of the hands or fingers. Insert picture.

Another consideration is brushing your teeth. Toothbrushes with built-up or extended handles and toothpaste dispenser aids might be helpful.

There also are many devices to make bathing and grooming easier for those with arthritic legs. Grab bars in the shower or bathtub provide support while standing or while getting in and out of the bathtub or shower. A shower stool or bench allows you to sit while taking a shower, alleviating pressure on your legs. Shower seats and benches may be freestanding or they may be built-in. Insert pictures. Hand-held showers may make showering while seated more comfortable and easier to manage.

Getting Dressed

Pulling on shoes and socks, buttoning a shirt, or trying to zip a dress or jacket can be frustrating if you have arthritis. There are a variety of products available to make getting dressed much easier.

If you have difficulty putting on socks or hosiery, several different styles of sock and stocking aids are available. Some of these devices are simple contoured plastic sheets that can be folded and shaped to fit the sock and keep it open for your foot to enter. Others are molded in to shape. Both styles feature cloth or webbing straps or rope handles attached to the upper end to allow you to pull the sock or stocking into place without bending.

Other sock aids include formed steel helper frames which are useful for socks, stockings, or elasticized support hose which require a stiffer frame to be held open. The basic purpose of all of these devices is to open up the sock or stocking, and then provide you with a way to pull it up without bending over.

Do you have difficulty buttoning your shirts or blouses? Some very simple, inexpensive devices can help. The most common device is a buttonhook, a short pole with a small closed hook at the end. Slip the hook around a button and then pull it through the buttonhole. If you've used a needle

threader, it works on the same principle. Buttonhooks come in a variety of styles and sizes, with long or built-up handles, or with ribbed handles for easier grasping.

Zippers can be difficult if you do not have good use of your fingers. One solution might be to attach a finger ring through the "eye" of the zipper tab. You can slip a finger through the ring to pull the zipper up or down, rather than having to grasp the small tab.

Zipper pulls are short handles with a hook at one end that slips into the "eye" in the zipper. Pulling the handle enables you to easily maneuver the zipper. Zipper pulls are often also attached to one end of long, multi-purpose dressing sticks or combined with button aids.

A number of alternatives are available to get shoes on and off. Shoehorns with long handles can be used to slip on shoes that do not need to be tied. Reachers can also be helpful in positioning and putting on or taking off shoes. Elastic shoelaces are available to keep "tie" shoes permanently tied but accessible. Small plastic clips are also available to hold shoelaces in place for people who have difficulty tying their laces.

If you have difficulty with dressing-related tasks, it is likely that there is a device or technique available somewhere to help you accomplish what you need to do. Check the ABLEDATA database, catalogs for independent living products, or some of the online resources we've identified to see what your options might be.

Food Preparation

Working in the kitchen can pose a problem when it is hard to grab, turn, and hold things. Fortunately, there are numerous devices that will allow a person with arthritis to open jars and bottles, as well as to cook. A bread slice holder makes cutting bread easy and bagel slicers take some of the difficulty out of dividing bagels. Cutting boards with corner guards and steel tines simplify buttering bread, cutting sandwiches, or cutting fruit or vegetables. Dycem pads or little octopus suction holders keep plates and bowls from sliding. Utensils and measuring spoons with large handles and movable grip rings also can be helpful, as can jar lid openers and can openers, pot lifters, handles for lifting soda bottles and milk cartons, and many other products. The range of products for opening jars, cans, and bottles is astonishing.

Driving

Cars and trucks can be adapted to make driving easier. It is possible to drive without using your legs. There are hand controls for the gas pedal and the brake. If use of one arm is limited, all driving controls can be adapted for use with the functional arm. Opening or turning the gasoline cap or ignition key can be difficult for someone with arthritis. Devices are also available to assist with these tasks. Even the front seat and steering wheel can be adapted for easier access.

Leisure Activities

Arthritis does not need to stop you from enjoying various leisure activities. Even if you use a wheelchair, you still can go bowling. There are devices to push the bowling ball, and ramps that rest on your lap or stand beside or in front of the wheelchair that allow you to roll the ball down the alley. Insert picture.

Arthritic hands do not need to stop you from playing cards. One of the many available card holders and/or a card shuffler might be helpful. Crocheting and knitting aids and needlework holders can also help you to continue enjoying those hobbies as well.

Book holders, writing aids, and spring-action or rolling scissors are often helpful in helping individuals with arthritic fingers, hands, and elbows enjoy a variety of activities.

Many of the on-line resources listed above carry some recreational products. Access to Recreation is a catalog that specializes in exercise and recreational products for people with a variety of physical needs, including arthritis. This company can be contacted at

Access to Recreation, Inc.
8 Sandra Court
Newbury Park, CA 91320-4302.
800-634-4351 or 805-498-7535.
Fax: 805-498-8186.
Web: www.AccessTR.com.

Joint Support Devices

Since people with arthritis have weak joints that can become swollen and painful, supporting the joints can be helpful in minimizing the affects of arthritis. Finger splints limit how far you can move your fingers, allowing the joints

to rest. Wrist braces offer support to joints in your wrist and at the base of your thumb.

If you decide to purchase a splint or brace, show it to your doctor to make sure it fits properly and provides the proper support. Otherwise, you can cause further damage.

Do-It-Yourself Hints and Devices

Some problems can best be solved with a little common sense and personal ingenuity. In conducting research for this Informed Consumer Guide, we came across several good ideas from people who had developed their own solutions to arthritis-related problems. Some of our favorites involve products commonly found on the market. They have been designed to increase everybody's comfort and ease, and they can be particularly helpful to people with arthritis. Take advantage of these readily-available "convenience" products:

- √ lights that go on and off by touching them or by clapping
- √ large-button remote controls and telephones
- √ telephone headsets
- √ large-key calculators
- √ shampoo and soap dispensers
- √ Good Grips® kitchen tools
- √ plastic milk carton holders
- √ automatic can openers
- √ large-handled flatware patterns.

Getting Information about Specific Products

We often receive requests for a list of all devices that assist people with arthritis. However, given the size and scope of our database and the changing nature of the assistive device market (new products are constantly being developed), this request would generate a long list of products, many of which may not meet your individual needs. To avoid "information overload," please use the following worksheet to determine what products may benefit you.

The worksheet asks questions about activities of daily living (ADLs), like picking things up, holding things, getting dressed, and the other areas discussed above. Each activity you do “with difficulty” or “not without help/not at all,” is followed by several words or terms that you can use to search the ABLEDATA database on our website, or that our information specialist can use to search the database for you when you call our office. These terms can help locate helpful products. Remember, not all terms apply to products you need; these are options to meet particular needs in specific areas.

In addition to assistive devices to aid with ADLs, the ABLEDATA database also includes listings of therapeutic devices including joint support products, paraffin baths, and more, should your physician recommend such devices.

Assistive Device Identification Worksheet

Grasping

Can you grasp and use such objects as eating utensils, keys, writing utensils, brushes, razors, makeup applicators, faucets, doorknobs, etc.?

Yes, without difficulty.
Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Home management, built up handle, razor holder, electric shaver holder, lipstick holder, door handles, door locks, holding, food preparation, housekeeping, writing tools, writing aid, plumbing accessories, garden handtools, scissors, dialing accessories (for telephones), and reception accessories (for telephones).

No, not without help/Not at all.

Search: Home management, keyless door lock, remote control door lock, feeders, feeding programs, voice activated telephone, speakerphone, telephone headset, typewriters, typing stick, remote control typing system, voice input keyboard (for computer), voice input program, voice input web browser, onscreen keyboard, and voice input mouse.

Holding

Can you hold items such as drinking containers, telephone receivers, or jars?

Yes, without difficulty.
Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Holding, home management, telephone holder, speakerphone, and dispenser aids.

Bathing and Grooming

Can you lift your arms to bathe or groom yourself?
Can you stand to shower or sit on the floor of the tub?

Yes, without difficulty.
Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Grab bars, bidets, bathing aids, bathtub seats general, shower chairs, shower stools, and hair care.

No, not at all/Not without help.

Search: Bath lifts, bathing aids, bathtub seats, bidets, and hair care.

Dressing

Can you dress yourself, fasten buttons, put on socks and shoes, tie shoes, and work zippers?

Yes, without difficulty
Go to next question

Yes, with difficulty

Search: Shoe aids, stocking aids, button aids, zipper pull, dressing stick, and watch winder

Reaching

Can you reach objects above you or bend to pick up items from the floor?

Yes, without difficulty.
Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Reaching, reachers, and tongs.

Carrying

Can you carry objects?

Yes, without difficulty.

Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Carrying, shopping, folding cart, and rolling cart.

Sitting and Standing Up

Can you raise yourself from a sitting position without using your arms?

Yes, without difficulty.

Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Commodes, toilet seats, seating systems general, positioning seats general, adjustable chair, chair with descending seat, seat lift chair, and work chair.

Using Stairs

Can you go up and down stairs?

Yes, without difficulty.

Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Canes, stair walkers, and stair lifts.

No, not at all.

Search: Stair lifts, elevators, and ramps.

Walking

Can you walk on flat ground or stand on your own?

Yes, without difficulty.

Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Mobility, canes, crutches general, walkers, prone standers, and wheelchair alternatives.

No, not at all.

Search: Mobility and other standing aids.

Leisure

Can you enjoy your hobbies and leisure activities?

Yes, without difficulty

Go to next question

Yes, with difficulty

Search: Arts and crafts, cards, puzzle aid, gardening, clamp on needlework hoop, needle threader, self threading sewing needle, sewing aid, trigger finger support, trigger activator, rowing system, bowling, fishing, pool lift swimming pool access aid, typewriters, typing stick, remote control typing system, voice input keyboard (for computer), voice input program, voice input web browser, onscreen keyboard, voice input mouse, writing tools, writing aid, bookholders, page turners, and food preparation.

Driving

Can you drive a car and manipulate vehicle controls?

Yes, without difficulty.

Go to next question.

Yes, with difficulty.

Search: Driving controls, gas cap opener, power window control, turn signal and light controls, swivel seat, car door opener, car door reacher, key holder.

No, not at all.

Search: Driving controls, automobile accessories, van accessories, wheelchair carriers, and vehicles.

Conclusion

Although arthritis can be a painful and disabling condition, there are many devices that can make life easier. We hope this Informed Consumer Guide has introduced you to resources and to adaptive devices that may help you perform your daily activities with greater comfort and enjoyment

This Guide is a publication of

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ABLEDATA is operated by Macro International, Inc. for the **National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research** (NIDRR), U. S. Department of Education, under contract number HN96015001.

ABLEDATA's phone numbers are 800/227-0216, 301/608-8998, or 301/608-8912 (TTY). Our fax number is 301/608-8958.

Many ABLEDATA documents, as well as the ABLEDATA database are available from the ABLEDATA website, <http://www.abledata.com>.

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