



## Learn truths about arthritis during May

Arthritis is the nation's most common cause of disability.

That is not a myth. There are, however, numerous misconceptions about arthritis. Many people believe it only affects senior citizens and is nothing more than minor aches and pains.



Some think that cracking one's knuckles will cause arthritis, and others believe the disease is affected by the weather.

May is National Arthritis Awareness Month, the perfect time to debunk these and other common arthritis myths, and to provide education on the disease that affects 46 million Americans and one in three Pennsylvanians.

Arthritis does not exclusively affect seniors. In fact, more than 50 percent of people with arthritis are younger than age 65. Children, including infants and toddlers, can be diagnosed with juvenile arthritis, which affects nearly 300,000 American youth under the age of 18. Some of the most serious forms of arthritis occur in teenagers and in young adults in their 20s and 30s.

Several studies have found no association between knuckle cracking and arthritis, although the habit might affect grip strength over time. And, while living in cold, damp weather can aggravate arthritis pain, it will not affect disease progression. Some people with arthritis claim that warm and dry climates tend to decrease their pain, but study results show that arthritis pain may have no connection to barometric pressure, dampness, humidity, or any other component of weather.

Other misconceptions about arthritis include:

**Myth:** Arthritis is a minor ailment characterized by minor aches and pains.

**Fact:** Arthritis can cause severe disability — even death — affecting blood vessels, internal organs, connective tissue, cartilage and joints, and increasing risk for cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

**Myth:** There is only one type of arthritis.

**Fact:** Arthritis is an umbrella term for more than 100 inflammatory and non-inflammatory diseases, including lupus, gout, rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma and fibromyalgia.

**Myth:** Not much can be done to combat arthritis.

**Fact:** Access to healthcare, medications, physical and occupational therapy, evidence-based programs and workplace accommodations can improve health and well-being.

**Myth:** Exercise only makes arthritis worse.

**Fact:** Research shows that physical activity decreases pain, improves function and delays disability.

**Myth:** Excess weight doesn't affect arthritis.

**Fact:** The frequency of arthritis increases with additional weight.

**Myth:** Arthritis only affects the joints.

**Fact:** In addition to joint swelling and pain, symptoms of arthritis can include infections of the skin, joint, kidney, lung, heart, nervous system and blood cells accompanied by fatigue, weakness and reduced mobility.

"With more than 100 different types of arthritis it's no wonder that misconceptions and myths about the disease are abundant in our society. Arthritis is the most common cause of disability in the U.S., so it's important that people know the truth about arthritis, especially since one in three Pennsylvanians have a form of it," said Jane Brandenstein, Vice-Chair of the Arthritis Foundation Western Pennsylvania Chapter. "There are several resources, including our Web site at [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org), where people can find factual information about arthritis, its causes and treatments."

National Arthritis Awareness Month was founded by Presidential Proclamation in 1972, and aims to increase awareness in the prevention and control of arthritis. Arthritis is the most common cause of disability for 46 million adults and nearly 300,000 children, hitting our economy with a hefty \$128 billion price tag. The level of federal funding for arthritis public health and research has declined steadily by nearly \$28 million over the past six years, though the prevalence of arthritis is expected to rise by 40 percent in the next two decades.

*This column was written by Kelly Drevitch, Director of Programs for the Western Pennsylvania Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation. For more information on this article, please call 412-566-1645. The Center for Healthy Aging is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit [www.healthyaging.pitt.edu](http://www.healthyaging.pitt.edu).*