

## Arthritis Awareness Month, May 2021

By Stephen Anable



May is Arthritis Awareness Month, focusing much-needed attention on a disease that affects approximately one in four Americans, including many older adults. Doctors have identified more than 100 types of arthritis, which is defined as inflammation of the joints, tissues surrounding the joints, and other connective tissues. The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis, degeneration of the joint cartilage and underlying bone. Osteoarthritis occurs most often in the hands, knees, hips, and spine. Arthritis ranks as a major cause of disability among working-age Americans. The disease can make it difficult to exercise, and yet mobility can play a major role in reducing its symptoms of pain and stiffness.

Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley and North Shore has been partnering with the Alliance of Massachusetts YMCAs to present Evidence-Based fitness programs for people living with arthritis. Both organizations have received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop courses that teach people with arthritis exercises and techniques to take charge of their health, increase their activity, and reduce pain.

The past year of the COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed many group gatherings that kept older people mobile in settings like senior centers and health clubs. Exercise routines, yoga classes, weight training, and more were paused as we heeded medical experts and stayed home. But spring is a time of renewal and warmer weather. And this May—when more of us have been vaccinated and the CDC has accordingly relaxed masking guidelines—is an ideal month to get out and get moving.

Our agency's Healthy Living Center of Excellence offers courses for people with arthritis coupled with other chronic conditions. About half of adults with heart disease (49 percent) or diabetes (47 percent) have arthritis, as do 31 percent of people who are obese, according to the CDC. The Chronic Disease Self-Management Program and The Chronic Pain Self-Management Program were designed for such people and have been conducted nationally on a regular basis.

The Matter of Balance Program is proven to reduce falls by setting reasonable goals for activity, suggesting changes in participants' home environments to eliminate safety hazards, and teaching exercises that bolster strength and balance. Workshops in Tai Ji Quan and Tai Chi

adapt traditional movement techniques, used for hundreds of years in Asia, that sharpen physical and mental agility. And the members of the Alliance of Massachusetts YMCAs are presenting Enhance® Fitness classes, “moderate-impact classes with high-impact results,” that can help those with arthritis begin or resume an exercise routine. Enhance® Fitness classes bolster energy, balance, range of motion, and upper and lower body strength.

Of course, walking is also efficient exercise and requires little equipment beyond sensible shoes or sneakers. Riding a bike is another low-impact venture that can be of benefit, as is swimming. As everyone has no doubt heard, exercise boosts endorphins, chemicals the body produces that enhance our mood, relieving the feelings of fatigue that can accompany arthritis.

The CDC recommends that all adults, including those with arthritis, get two hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity and do muscle-strengthening exercise two or more days per week. So why not mark May—Arthritis Awareness Month—by “springing forward” and becoming more active?

For more information about courses at the Healthy Living Center of Excellence, visit <https://healthyliving4me.org/>