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4 Ways to Keep Your Joints Healthy

Orthopedists share their best tips.

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When I was younger, I used to spring out of bed. Now, it's more like a slow heave — my knees and hips protesting as I release a middle-aged groan.

But I've gotten some relief by stretching for five minutes each morning. I picked this tip up from Dr. Gbolahan Okubadejo, a spine surgeon in New York and New Jersey. He told me that he's been doing this every morning to keep his joints and muscles limber. Now I do the same.

We should think of our joints as more than just "hinges on a machine," said Dr. M. Lucius Pomerantz, an orthopedic surgeon in San Diego. "We should be nurturing them," he said. A joint is anywhere two bones meet, and we have about 350 of them. They're essential for movement, flexibility and stability.

I asked experts for their best tips on how to keep them supple.

Movement is like WD-40 for your joints.

Regular movement is critical for joint health, Dr. Okubadejo said. Our hip, shoulder, knee and elbow joints are called synovial joints; they contain fluid that helps nourish the cartilage by preventing wear while the joint is in motion.

Movement helps circulate the fluid and lubricate those joints, averting stiffness and discomfort, said Dean Padavan, associate program director of Primary Care Sports Medicine Fellowship at Atlantic Health.

In addition to regular stretching, Dr. Okubadejo recommends 150 minutes a week of moderate to vigorous exercise. That could be gentler, joint-friendly activities such as yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi, or something more intense, like swimming laps.

And with the exception of swimming, “exercises where your feet are planted are better for your joints,” said Anna Noel Miller, chair of orthopedics at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. She suggests bicycling or an elliptical machine, rather than exercises like running, where “there’s a lot more banging on that cartilage.”

Approach supplements with caution.

Numerous companies sell supplements like glucosamine and chondroitin that they claim can improve joint health, and people are snapping them up. The National Institutes of Health estimate that 6.5 million adults have used one or both of these products.

The research, however, is mixed on whether supplements actually help with stiffness and pain. Antonia Chen, chair of orthopaedic surgery at UT Southwestern Medical Center, warns patients that these supplements aren’t well studied — or tightly regulated by the federal government.

So, before taking one, run it by your primary care physician to discuss side effects and potential drug interactions, Dr. Chen added.

If your doctor gives you the go-ahead to try a supplement, look for a certification seal from a trusted third-party organization such as the NSF International, Dr. Padavan said, which confirms that the products contain the ingredients listed on

the label.

Lifestyle changes are most helpful for joints.

Several experts say that lifestyle habits like exercise and good nutrition are the best way to keep your joints supple.

Try not to sit for longer than an hour at a time, and set a timer to remind you to get up if you have to, Dr. Okubadejo said. That includes long car trips, he added. “Get out of the car and walk around,” he said. When you sit in the same position for too long, circulation slows and your spine can stiffen, he added, so even a few minutes of light movement can help.

Following an anti-inflammatory diet may help control inflammation, which can lead to joint pain, according to the Arthritis Foundation. And some studies suggest that diets high in ultraprocessed foods are linked to a greater risk of the development of arthritis.

Excess weight puts additional stress on weight-bearing joints, which can result in pain, Dr. Miller said. In fact, research suggests that every pound of weight lost removes four pounds of pressure on lower-body joints. “I tell patients, ‘If you lose five pounds, that’s almost 20 pounds of force off your knees,’” Dr. Padavan said.

Don’t normalize joint pain.

It’s tempting to think that joint pain is a natural part of getting older, but all the experts said not to ignore it.

Jason Zaremski, chief of sports medicine at the University of Florida department of physical medicine and rehabilitation, asks patients to rate their pain on a scale from zero to 10. “If you feel subjectively that you’re a four or more, you probably should go get checked out,” he said. “And I teach my residents and fellows, if something’s hot, red, swollen, that’s bad.”

A few minutes of creakiness in the morning, like mine, is “probably fine,” Dr. Chen said. But if your stiffness lasts longer than an hour, or you’re avoiding normal activities because of joint pain, see a doctor, she said.

In my case, by the time I've reached the kitchen in the morning to make my coffee, I've stopped hobbling. Tiny victories.

Has 'mankeeping' seeped into your relationship?

'Mankeeping' is a term that has taken off on social media to describe the work women do to meet the social and emotional needs of the men in their lives. If this dynamic feels familiar, here's what to do about it.

Read the article: Why Women Are Weary of the Emotional Labor of 'Mankeeping.'

New research suggests that 60 percent of liver cancer cases can be prevented.

Liver cancer kills more than 700,000 people a year. Alcohol-related liver disease is also on the rise. But three in five cases could be avoided, according to a comprehensive analysis published on Monday.

Read the article: 3 Out of 5 Liver Cancer Cases Are Preventable, Study Finds

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Jancee Dunn, who writes the weekly Well newsletter for The Times, has covered health and science for more than 20 years.

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