

# Relationships, intimacy and arthritis



devised with and for people with arthritis



ARTHRITIS CARE

*Empowering  
people with arthritis.*



Sharing life and experiences with others can bring a lot of pleasure and joy – whether they are family, a partner or a friend. Most people have to make an effort to maintain good relationships with others and having arthritis can mean that you need put a little more work in. Usually, this can simply mean approaching situations more creatively.

This booklet is here to help. You might think your arthritis is a problem when you are trying to form or sustain relationships. You might think your arthritis prevents you from having a satisfying sex life. Even if your relationships are trouble-free, this booklet may give you some new, positive ideas. Partners and family members may also find this booklet useful.

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**Arthritis Care is now a certified member of The Information Standard. This means that you can be confident that Arthritis Care is a reliable and trustworthy source of health and social care information.**

*All people pictured on the cover and quoted in this booklet have arthritis.*

## FIRST THOUGHTS

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People with arthritis have to work hard at their relationships, just like everyone else. However, as a person with arthritis, you might have to invest more time and energy into making your relationships work, whether they are of a platonic or intimate nature.

Effective communication is an important part of all relationships, including those with your partner, children, parents, friends and work colleagues. So, it is important that you are open and honest about how your arthritis affects you.

As well as coping with symptoms such as pain, fatigue and loss of mobility, you might also sometimes feel angry, frustrated and depressed. All of these emotions can affect your relationships with others so it is often helpful to explain this to those close to you.

You may feel that other people's negative perceptions about your arthritis are a barrier to you building successful relationships. It is often the case that people are negative when they do not understand something.

Remember that everyone is different and that if you can accept your differences, then others are more likely to do the same.

It can take time to learn to open up, but, in fact, having to explain your feelings can make you a better communicator. In due course, you may find you have a new, positive quality that others will appreciate.



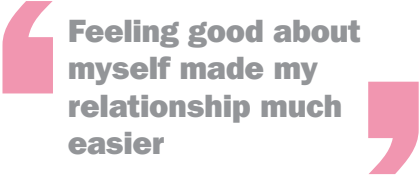
## ESTABLISHING A SOCIAL LIFE

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You may find it tiring enough simply managing your arthritis, let alone socialising with others. However, if you are experiencing pain or fatigue, distracting yourself by keeping busy can be one way of finding relief.

Having an active social life can also build your confidence and boost your self-esteem. Family and friends perform an important role for anyone – they provide a support network, and bring fun and outside interests into your life.

Some people with arthritis find it hard to meet people and make new friends. This may be down to lack of confidence, or physical difficulties in getting out and about. Others feel that they will be viewed differently because they have arthritis.



**Feeling good about myself made my relationship much easier**

You can do a lot to help build and maintain your friendships with some organisation and forward planning.

### ■ Plan and prioritise

Organisation and openness can help your social life.

- Make priorities in your social life so that you can keep up with valued friends.
- Setting aside rest days allows your body to re-energise so you can then join in activities.
- Do not be afraid to explain your needs – true friends will adapt to your circumstances.
- If your work – or life in general – leaves you too tired to enjoy any social life, consider changing your hours, occupation or commitments to allow time for proper rest times and socialising.

Do not underestimate how important it is to balance your priorities: everyone is entitled to a social life.

### ■ Physical barriers

A trip to the local pub, cinema or concert venue might seem daunting if there are steps that you find too painful to tackle.

Careful planning can help you get to these venues – it might be worth phoning ahead to ask about access. Under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) it is unlawful for shops, pubs, restaurants, sports centres and cinemas – any place that provides goods or services to the public – to discriminate against a disabled person.

Most people with arthritis are covered by this legislation. Venues should be aware that they are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable access (they have had many years prior warning of this legislation).

If you receive Attendance Allowance, the higher rate of the mobility component or the higher or middle rate of the care component of the Disability Living Allowance you are entitled to some help in getting out and about, such as the Disabled Persons Railcard. If you receive the higher mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance you are also entitled to access to a car through the Motability scheme and access to a Blue Badge (which enables you to park in accessible parking bays).

Even if you are physically unable to leave the house, this does not mean that you cannot enjoy a social life. See the 'Ideas on how to meet people' section for some tips. As well as there being more opportunities for meeting people online, there are outreach community groups in some areas.

**I find having rest days is so very important**

Friendships are usually built up over many years and are based on trust and respect as well as having fun. You might want to suggest alternative ways of enjoying yourselves – a new activity or an accessible local pub. If you are not feeling up to going out, you could explain this to your friends – perhaps they could come around to your place instead.



### ■ Your emotions

For many people with arthritis, a lack of self-confidence is a major barrier

to meeting other people, and even catching up with old friends. Some people feel embarrassed by their condition – although most people overcome negative thoughts about themselves with time.

If you are having difficulties accepting your arthritis, it might be helpful to discuss your feelings with someone. Your friends and family will probably be relieved that you brought the subject up. If this is too difficult, you might need to talk to someone else, such as a member of Arthritis Care’s helpline team. You might also find it helpful to read Arthritis Care’s booklet *Coping with Emotions*.

### Self-esteem

Self-esteem is all about liking yourself and feeling confident about who you are. Without it you might not feel assertive and able to communicate easily – qualities that help build a successful relationship.

There is more to self-esteem than just having a positive body image. Many people feel inadequate about not being clever, not having anything interesting to say or being shy.

Some people experiencing low self-esteem benefit from counselling or personal development courses – such as Arthritis Care’s self-management programmes. Others talk to their friends or other people with arthritis.

As well as taking care of yourself by eating well and exercising, there are some simple ways in which you can boost your self-esteem.

- Be yourself – have a positive attitude and accept yourself for who you are.
- Admit to your limitations, but focus on what you can do instead.
- Learn about your arthritis and your medications – this will help you predict when you might be feeling down and to plan activities around your high and low points.

Some people have found that their self-confidence has increased as a result of living with a long-term condition. Others feel that they

**My self-image has suffered because I don't fit into society's ideas concerning physical beauty**

have more insight into the feelings of others, increased empathy and the ability to express emotions more freely.

## ■ Overcoming prejudices

Images of physical perfection and fitness flood daily life. Although only a small minority of people fit into this category, these images can be distressing if you feel you are seen as being different. This is not a problem only experienced by people with arthritis.

Remember that everyone is different and that this is what makes people interesting. Try to embrace what makes you unique – if you present your differences confidently to people they are more likely to accept them.

To tackle prejudices, try to:

- be open and realistic with people
- explain positively what you can do rather than focusing on what you cannot.

## Gender stereotypes

The pressure to live up to traditional expectations of male and female roles is also a source of worry for some people. Arthritis might undermine men's confidence if it prevents them from taking on traditional male responsibilities such as decorating and fixing cars. Some men also find it hard to ask for help or to show signs of weakness.

Self-esteem in some women with arthritis can plummet if they feel unable to carry out more stereotypically female responsibilities such as maintaining the house, or if wearing things that make you feel feminine (such as high heels) seems impossible.

However, times are changing and it is no longer necessary to conform to gender stereotypes – women are not necessarily expected to be the only cook in the house any more and many men stay home to bring up children while their partner goes out to work.

**Having arthritis has led me to re-evaluate what it means to be a man**

If you are concerned that you are not fulfilling what you think is your role, talk things through with your partner or family. You might think that not being able to do something makes you less male/female, but they might not see it in these terms.

Family members or friends can sometimes be negative about your abilities. This is usually a protective measure – it might help if you explain your arthritis to them in more detail. See the ‘Family relationships’ section for more information.

## Sexuality

Some people know from a young age that they are more attracted to people of their own sex and grow up conscious that their sexual feelings are different from those of their friends. This can be a gradual process for many others.

**After a sexual relationship, my self-esteem and self-worth improved**

It can be difficult to recognise your sexuality and to maintain your self-esteem, especially if you are alone. If you already feel different because of your arthritis, it might be harder to feel good about being lesbian or gay.

Some people say that if you have already learned to cope with being seen as ‘different’ – being disabled, for example – then it is easier to apply the same feelings and attitudes to being gay or lesbian. Others, though, say they have experienced prejudice about disability within gay communities themselves.

If you need help to sort out your own feelings about being gay or lesbian, it can help to talk to someone who is not emotionally involved – many areas have gay or lesbian support groups (look in the phone book) which provide a confidential telephone service. The organisation Regard also runs a befriending service for disabled gay men and lesbians (see page 25).

## ■ Ideas on how to meet people

Meeting new people can be a little daunting for anybody. When meeting people, try not to focus on your arthritis – this is not

necessarily what they will see first – but on yourself as a whole person.

In situations where you are meeting people for the first time, remember to:

- be positive
- relax and be yourself – if you are nervous, take a few deep breaths before speaking
- smile – most people will warm to a friendly smile
- ask questions – everyone likes to talk about themselves.

If you try to do activities that you enjoy, you are more likely to meet like-minded people.

Some ways of meeting people are suggested below, but also remember that people who might already be part of your life, such as neighbours or work colleagues, could be potential friends.

### Bars and clubs

Jazz and comedy clubs can be an entertaining alternative to your local pub. You often sit at tables during the shows and can have a meal. Access to venues may be a problem, so phone in advance to book a seat and, if necessary, to see if arrangements for easier access can be made. Services, such as Artsline in London, provide information on access to the arts and entertainment for disabled people ([www.artslineonline.com](http://www.artslineonline.com)). If you are summoning up the courage to go to your local pub, why not try going on a quiz night and see if any teams could do with an extra player.

### Hobbies

Learning a new skill is a great way of boosting your confidence and sharing an interest with like-minded people is an ideal way to develop relationships. There are a wide range of courses available at adult education centres, or you could contact your local leisure centre to join a class such as yoga or tai chi. Fees are usually reasonable and some council-run places offer accessible courses. Your local council should also be able to tell you about societies/groups with a special interest, for example, amateur dramatics groups, or football

supporters clubs. Often, you can find details of these groups in the local paper.

### Faith groups

A religious community can be a very supportive environment. Attending a place of worship can help you to meet people practising the same faith, and perhaps join in charitable and social activities.

### The internet

For some, computers might seem daunting and impersonal. However, advances in technology mean that using the internet as a communication tool is not just about staring at words on a screen – video messaging, online phone calls and webcams have all brought staying in touch to life. And emails are a fun and cheap way of regularly keeping in touch with friends and making new ones.

There are many sites on the internet where you can chat to other people with a shared interest such as a favourite pop star, writer or football team. If you are not sure where to start, try out the Arthritis Care discussion forum ([www.arthritiscare.org.uk/forum](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk/forum)).

You could also try signing onto friendship and dating websites (see ‘Dating agencies’).

Online learning programmes enable you to enhance your skills and knowledge and make new friends at the same time.

### Holidays

There is a wide selection of holidays you can go on, either with friends and family or with an organised group. From cruises to adventure holidays in Africa or trips to Brighton, there is something to suit most people.

Try looking in local papers or travel agents for groups that organise singles holidays if you do not have someone to go with. These usually cater for a range of age groups.



## The arts

You might think about joining a local arts centre or film club. This is a great way to meet people with similar interests and you can attend any special events, previews or lectures they hold.

## Dating agencies

Dating agencies team you up with someone who has similar interests and character traits to yourself. There are a number of specialist agencies for disabled people, Christians, gay and lesbian people etc. There is usually a fee.

Some people use online dating websites or put personals adverts in the newspaper.

If you are meeting someone new for the first time, don't forget your own personal safety. Let a friend know where you are going and suggest meeting up in a public place. Give yourself time to get to know each other.



**Having arthritis  
doesn't mean I am  
not going to go out**

## Support groups

Arthritis Care is just one of many support groups you could get involved in. Local contacts can put you in touch with people in a similar situation to yourself. Get in touch through the phone book or library, or look on the Arthritis Care website for details of your nearest group.

## Campaigning groups

There are many groups of people who join together to campaign on a particular issue or issues, such as the environment, famine in developing countries, or the arms trade. Disability rights groups are concerned with campaigning for rights for all disabled people. By joining a campaigning group you could meet people with whom you could share a passion, and help to influence decision-makers and the public.

## Voluntary work

Voluntary work is a good way to do something worthwhile with your free time and meet people with similar interests to you.

Follow your personal interests – there are all sorts of organisations in need of help.

Check your local paper for vacancies. Also look online at the do-it website ([www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk)). This is a UK-wide database of volunteering opportunities that is searchable by your local area and interests.

**I have found new friends through volunteering**

# MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Maintaining a solid relationship with someone takes continued effort. Effective communication is essential whether the relationship is with a family member, partner, friend or colleague.



## ■ Communication

Discussing your arthritis openly with your family and friends can help to dispel any misconceptions they might have. Frank discussions will also help them realise and accept what you can and cannot do.

## Assertiveness

Learning to be assertive does not happen overnight, but it can follow on naturally from having improved self-esteem.

Understanding your arthritis and being able to manage it will

naturally make you feel more confident. Some people find it helpful to attend assertiveness or confidence-building courses.

Assertiveness is about being able to declare what you want or need firmly and calmly – it does not mean that you need to be aggressive or forceful. If you find it difficult to express your opinions, try to think about what you want to say before you start speaking. Some people find it helpful to write a list of things and practise saying them out loud.

Many people find it hard to say ‘no’ when asked if they will (or want to) do something. It is always possible to rephrase what you say. For example, if you were asked by a friend to go for a walk, you could

“ **My friends are really understanding and it hasn’t affected my relationships at all** ”

say something like: 'I'm not feeling up to a walk today, but it would be lovely to see you so maybe you could come around for a chat.'

### Changing needs

If you have an established relationship with someone that has changed as a result of your arthritis, it can be worth having an open discussion about what adjustments and compromises both of you would find satisfactory.

If your relationship has lost some of its closeness, you could rediscover it by sitting down and going through things that you like the other to do – even if it is just buying flowers or helping you around the house. If you are a couple, remembering why you fell for each other could also re-establish your bond.

Your partner or family member might not understand your pain and be afraid to touch you. Explain how your arthritis affects you. Pain is a very individual thing and most people with arthritis experience different levels at different times.

Your partner or family member might be able to understand your pain better if you rate it on a scale of one to 10. That way they will be more confident about what kind of physical contact is right for your current level of pain.

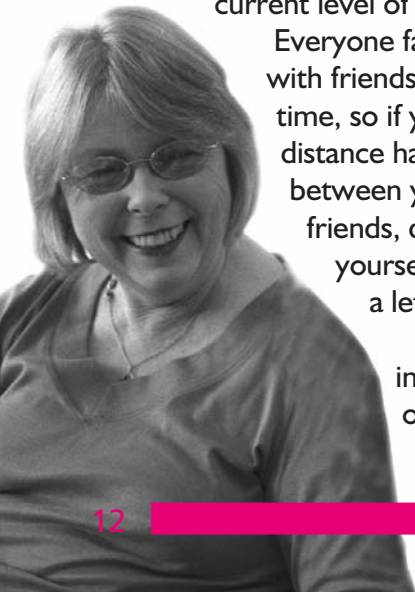
Everyone falls out of touch with friends from time to time, so if you feel a distance has grown between you and your friends, don't beat

yourself up about it. But do pick up the phone, or send a letter or email when you're up to it.

You might feel like you are always saying 'no' to invitations out if these come when you are down, or you can't manage the activity suggested. People

**Sometimes I say  
"I'm feeling good  
today, let's go  
for it"**

**Some so-called  
friends used to give  
me a hard time,  
until I told them how  
it made me feel**



need to understand the changing nature of arthritis: some days are good, some can be bad. Be as open as you can about your reasons and next time you know your answer will be 'no', try to think of an alternative that you can all enjoy together.

### Ending relationships

It is a sad fact that not all relationships withstand the strains that a long-term condition such as arthritis can bring, no matter how hard you both work at it.

Sometimes, as painful as it can be, accepting the end of a relationship is the best way to move on with your life.

There are plenty of organisations and professionals who can provide support, should you feel you would like to talk to someone not involved in your situation (see below and pages 24-25).

### Counselling

If you are finding it hard to come to terms with your arthritis or you are feeling that arthritis has affected a relationship you have, counselling may be of benefit. Talking to someone who is not emotionally involved in your problems can be a real help.

There are many different types of counselling now available through the NHS and through the voluntary and private sectors. Often local and national disability organisations will know of counsellors who have personal experience or close knowledge of disability issues.

Organisations such as Relate or The Outsiders have their own specialist services or contacts for couples.

**I've learned life doesn't stop on diagnosis: it is a matter of learning a new way of living**



Lisa F. Young @ Fotolia.com

## **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

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It is important to take the time to talk about your arthritis with your family so that they gain a more realistic understanding of how it affects you. Families may worry more than others and hence have a tendency to be overprotective or critical.

By talking openly, you are more likely to protect your position within your family, and remain equal with your partner.

### **■ Children**

Almost everybody worries about whether they are a good parent. While you can be a good parent with arthritis, you may have to accept that you cannot do everything; some adjustments to family life could be necessary.

Children learn very fast what their parents can or cannot do, but it might help if you explain why you feel worse on certain days. Explain that the pain can sometimes make you irritable and try to teach them to recognise the signs of bad days.

Remember that, to them, you are mum or dad and it will soon seem perfectly normal to them that mum cannot run or dad cannot lift them. Focus on what you can do together, such as reading a book, rather than running around a park.

### **■ Parents and family**

Your parents might find it hard to accept that you have arthritis, particularly if they are in good health themselves. Often family members worry because they do not understand the condition.

Therefore, it is important that you talk to them about your arthritis. You could give them Arthritis Care's booklets to read, and/or refer them to the next page in this booklet.

Your parents and family may be inclined to fuss over you. Long-term, this can be restricting. By gaining knowledge about your arthritis and explaining this to them, you will be more able to assert your independence. Remember, you know your own condition best.

## ■ If a family member/partner has arthritis

If someone you love has arthritis, it can be upsetting and frustrating to see them in pain. You might also feel upset or angry about the effect on your relationship with them.

A long-term condition can have an impact on practicalities, such as the family finances or an uneven division of the household workload. It can also be upsetting if your loved one flinches away from physical contact and is very withdrawn.

If you are in this situation, bear in mind that the person with arthritis will most likely find this doubly frustrating. Remember:

- arthritis is just one thing that affects your relationship – try not to let it take over
- your loved one might sometimes need some time alone and distance – this might mean restraining from physical contact
- don't mollycoddle them
- if you are your loved one's carer as well as their partner/parent/child, try to separate the two roles
- learning about arthritis and how it affects your loved one, will make it easier to deal with differing emotions.

### What can I do to help?

If you live with someone who has arthritis, it is likely that you will need to adjust your lifestyle. This might mean:

- thinking more laterally about how household tasks are shared
- discovering new leisure time activities together
- offering practical help, for example, assistance in taking medications, doing exercises together, helping with complementary therapies (such as a massage)
- taking the children out to give your partner a break.

Always ask about how to give help when your loved one needs it. Do not assume you know. The help might be as simple as moving something or helping them lift a heavy glass at the pub.

Remember that arthritis is just a part, not the whole, of your loved one. By listening, trying to understand their condition and how they want you to help, you may become even closer.

## SEXUAL AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Being able to talk to your partner about sex is important in a sexual relationship. When beginning a relationship, tell your partner your hopes and desires, but also your physical limitations and fears.

Difficulties you come across may be due to shyness and inhibitions – feelings experienced by many people, whether they have arthritis or not.

You and your partner can set about exploring new ways of making love. Make love when you feel relaxed and when your joints are not particularly painful. Enter into things in a spirit of adventure – laugh and play, be loving towards each other.

Tell your partner what hurts you, but be clear about what you find particularly enjoyable. Explore ways in which you can return pleasure.

### ■ Finding ways of making love

Sex is not simply about reaching rapid orgasm from the standard missionary position. A slower approach, with brief rests, can prove immensely satisfying for partners who have mutual respect and love for each other. Romance and intimacy can be extremely satisfying.

**We have tried out every position we can think of**

Sex is not confined to full penetration. Caressing intimate areas with the hands, mouth, lips – and any part of the body that can manage it – can be intensely pleasurable, and massage can be a very romantic and enjoyable experience.

Think about what you can use to support your body during lovemaking. Besides using cushions, pillows and large beanbags, leaning over a chair or table can prove helpful.

Using your imagination can also be fun when tackling problems such as putting on a condom. It certainly makes sense to unwrap them shortly in



advance. Safe sex is as important for people with arthritis as anyone else.

## ■ Arthritis and lovemaking

### Lack of libido

Some people who have arthritis find that their sex drive diminishes. Arthritis itself does not cause loss of desire, but the physical pain and emotional stresses that come with it can affect your sexual needs, ability and satisfaction. A number of things could be behind this.

If tiredness is the problem, plan in advance to make love. If pain is a problem, time lovemaking to coincide with when you get the greatest relief from your painkillers.

You could have a bath or shower

first to loosen up your joints. Of course you will not always want to plan when you have sex – if you decide to be spontaneous then just make sure you communicate how you feel to your partner.


Depression can also influence your desire. If you worry that your partner may no longer find you attractive, try discussing your feelings. Or if you are unable to talk to them, you could talk to your GP or a member of the Arthritis Care helplines team. You can ask to speak to someone of the same gender if you feel this will help you to open up.

Some common arthritis medications can influence and suppress sexual desire in both men and women. Sexual desire is not something most doctors will freely enquire about, so be assertive and bring up the topic yourself. You do not have to sacrifice a satisfying love life for your medication or arthritis.


### Physical difficulties

You might find oral sex difficult if you have a stiff jaw, and hands can tire during masturbation and caressing. Take your time – gentle petting can be extremely pleasing.

Sex aids or toys, such as vibrators, can prove useful if you have limited or painful finger movements. These can be used for your own



**We may not have sex as often, but it has become even more special**



pleasure or to give pleasure to your partner.

They can be bought over the internet, for ultimate discretion. However, don't discount visiting a sex shop (there are some respectable ones out there) to have a look at the aids before you buy. Shop with your partner or a friend – it's a chance to have a giggle and make sure you can operate the necessary buttons, put in any batteries and so on.

If you have had a hip replacement you are likely to be advised to refrain from sexual activity for about six to eight weeks after your operation (when the capsule around your joint has healed). Your surgeon will tell you when this has happened.



**Good sex is the icing on the cake, but it's the cake that's important**



You might not feel recovered from the operation at this point, and may still need to have some rest during the day, so listen to how your body feels. If you do not feel like having full sex, you can still touch your partner and enjoy being together.

For some people, the fear of dislocating their new hip or hurting their partner can cause anxiety and inhibit sex. Obviously you have to take some care – not bending your hip more than 90 degrees to your body, for instance – but your new hip should be quite stable and more than able to cope with sex. You should have more movement in your joint and less pain, so sex should be more enjoyable than before your operation.

You might find it more comfortable to lie underneath rather than on top of your partner. You can have successful and enjoyable sex without having to move your legs too widely – experiment with the position you find most comfortable.

### Other issues

Some women with certain types of arthritis, such as Sjögren's syndrome or in systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), find that vaginal lubrication can be reduced which results in feelings of vaginal dryness and pain during intercourse.

You can use water-based lubricants to help replace lubrication, for example KY Jelly. If this is not sufficient, ask your GP about products with a thicker consistency. Do not use oil-based lubricants or cortisone creams which interfere with vaginal tissues. Find out how much to use by trial and error. Try a minimum of lubrication in the vagina and add a thin layer directly to the penis.

An additional problem can be a dry mouth, leading to cracks and sores. During oral sex, use a thin condom over the penis to prevent infection and the transmission of diseases. Some condoms are unpleasant to taste, but flavoured ones are available – even curry flavour.

### Safe sex

Safe sex involves you enjoying sex while reducing the risks of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. You may want to avoid getting pregnant as well. Only you and your partner can decide what is an acceptable amount of risk. In addition, if you have sex and are taking some drugs like methotrexate, it is vital that you use contraception as the drug can cause harm to an unborn baby. Ask your doctor if you are unsure.

There are a number of different forms of contraception. The contraceptive pill will help protect against pregnancy, but offers no protection against sexually transmitted diseases. Using condoms with spermicide correctly can reduce risk, as can using lubricants.

Some contraceptive devices may not be practical for women with arthritis – for example, inserting a diaphragm correctly involves considerable flexing of your hip and legs as well as squeezing.

The safest alternative is not having penetrative sex and finding other ways of lovemaking. Your doctor or local family planning clinic should be able to give you advice. Alternatively, ask whether a health professional at your health centre would be able to give you advice on the advantages and disadvantages of different methods.

### ■ Positions

The following positions are used by people with arthritis who have differing physical abilities, including wheelchair users and people with

limited joint movement. The illustrations and descriptions are of heterosexual couples, but gay couples should find it easy to adapt and use these positions.

All these positions can be varied to suit your needs. It is best to approach new methods light-heartedly. Remember that sex does not have to be a mad, thrusting rush, over within minutes (though occasionally that might be what you want). You can use cushions for support – helping to lift and cushion the hips, for example. If you fail to find a comfortable position first time, look forward to your next attempt.

### Spoons

A very gentle position and suitable for people who have difficulties with most joints. The man lies behind the woman on his side and enters her from this position. Some flexibility in the woman's hip joints may be necessary to bring the legs forward but she can keep her knees straight. For a man with arthritis, further joint movement in his hips and knees may be necessary. Some hand movement may be necessary for the man to guide his penis into position. This is a good position for a man to give clitoral stimulation to a woman during penetrative sex.

*Spoons viewed from the side*



*Spoons viewed from above*



### Crossways

Recommended by many people with arthritis as a position you can do for hours. Suitable for overcoming many difficulties and where both partners have arthritis. The man lies on his side and the woman lies crosswise against him,



her bottom touching his lower thigh, her vagina meeting his penis side on. Her legs can bend over his body, resting behind his bottom, or can be supported by a cushion to keep them straight. One/both partners will need to roll forward and back during sex and some amount of flexibility is needed in the woman's hips. Good for awkward backs, but may prove difficult for people with chunky bottoms.

### Adapted missionary

Both partners need to be of slim build and have fairly flat stomachs. Suitable for women with arthritis although a cushion under the bottom may help those with limited hip movement. The man does have to take his full weight on his arms, hands, and knees, and needs to open his hips wide. The woman opens her legs slightly to a comfortable position so that genitals can come into contact.

The man lies over her with his legs wide apart, each side of her. A cushion under the woman's bottom may be necessary to raise her pelvis to the correct height for penetration. It is very important that the woman feels comfortable and is at no risk of being squashed.

Another variation on the missionary position is for the woman, on her back, to place her legs straight up in the air, resting against the man's torso and neck as he kneels behind her legs, facing her. Again, a cushion may be needed.



### Rear entry

This involves the woman lying on her stomach supported by any number of cushions, usually including some under the stomach, head and perhaps knees. The man lies over her, supporting his own weight, entering the vagina from behind. Some amount of flexibility is needed in the knees and hips,



and the woman must be able to lie on her front without causing pain to the neck, knees or ankles.

Many variations on the rear entry position are possible as long as you lose any inhibitions about it and avoid kneeling or bearing too much weight on any painful joints. For example, the woman can bend over a chair or table (again using cushions for comfort), whilst the man stands behind her.

### Woman on top

Suitable for a man with arthritis and a woman who does not, unless she has full movement in her joints and no pain. The woman kneels over the man as he lies flat. Alternatively, the man could sit on a chair and the woman sit on top of him, using the chair for support. Some hand assistance may be needed from the woman for full penetrative sex.



### Non-penetrative sex

Lovemaking does not have to mean penetrative sex. Non-penetrative sex is often seen as simply a prelude to 'proper' sex, but it can be just as fulfilling and satisfying.

Non-penetrative sex can include kissing, stroking, licking – basically anything that gives you and your partner pleasure.

For some people with arthritis, actual penetration might not always be an option because of pain and limited mobility. Non-penetrative sex can be fun and bring you very close to your partner.

Feel free to experiment. Consider using sex toys or food – they might add to your enjoyment.

## A FINAL NOTE

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Every relationship is a partnership – with both sides taking the responsibility to make things work. Relationships take time to develop and mature. Understanding the impact of your arthritis, and perhaps adjusting to it can also take time, so allow for this.

Relationships are not always easy, but you have taken a positive step in reading this booklet. And the support available to you does not end here – there are many other sources of help, whether you are after information, or someone to talk to (see pages 24-25). It is worth the investment – positive relationships can be a source of lifelong pleasure and happiness.

With good communication, honesty and respect, there is no reason why all your relationships should not be successful.

**The most important thing – and the most difficult – in any relationship is to talk about your needs, likes and dislikes**

**Our booklets are reviewed every 12-18 months. Please check our website for the latest version and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.**

## USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

● **arc (Arthritis Research Campaign)**

Copeman House,  
St Mary's Court,  
St Mary's Gate,  
Chesterfield,  
Derbyshire S41 7TD  
Tel: 01246 558033  
or 0870 850 5000  
[www.arc.org.uk](http://www.arc.org.uk)

● **British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy**

PO Box 13686,  
London SW20 9ZH  
Tel: 020 8543 2707  
Web: [www.basrt.org.uk](http://www.basrt.org.uk)

● **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

BACP House,  
15 St. John's Business Park,  
Lutterworth,  
Leicestershire LE17 4HB  
Tel: 0870 443 5252  
[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

● **Brook Advisory Centres**

Free and confidential sexual health advice and contraception for people under 25 in 17 centres across the UK.

421 Highgate Studios,  
53-79 Highgate Road,  
London NW5 1TL  
Helpline: 0808 802 1234  
[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

● **Family Planning Association Clinics**

Addresses in local phone books

● **Family Planning Association**

Sexual health advice across the UK.  
[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

**England, Wales and Scotland**

Helpline: 0845 122 8690  
(Mon-Fri: 9am-6pm)

**Northern Ireland**

Helpline: 0845 122 8687  
(Mon-Thurs: 9am-5pm,  
Fri: 9am-4.30pm)

● **The Outsiders**

4s Leroy House,  
435 Essex Road,  
London  
NI 3QP  
Tel: 020 7354 8291  
[www.outsiders.org.uk](http://www.outsiders.org.uk)

● **Sex and Disability Helpline**

Dr Tuppy Owens,  
BCM Box Lovely,  
London  
WC1N 3XX  
Tel: 0707 499 3527

● **Rape Crisis Centres**

There are more than 50 across the UK. The phone book or local advice agency will give you a local number.

● **Winchester RASAC:  
Rape and Sexual Abuse  
Counselling**

Women's helpline:  
01962 848024  
Men's helpline:  
01962 848027  
[www.rasasc.org.uk](http://www.rasasc.org.uk)

● **Regard**

A national organisation of and for disabled lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people.  
BM Regard  
London WC1N 3XX  
[www.regard.org.uk](http://www.regard.org.uk)

● **Relate**

Premier House,  
Carolina Court, Lakeside  
Doncaster DN4 5RA  
Tel: 0300 100 1234  
[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

● **Samaritans**

There are around 200 branches of the Samaritans throughout the UK. They can be very helpful for advice and referral if you need someone to talk to.  
Chris, PO Box 9090,  
Stirling FK8 2SA  
Tel: 08457 909090  
Textphones: 08457 909192  
[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

● **Survivors UK**

Offers support for male victims of sexual abuse.  
Ground Floor,  
34 Great James Street,  
London,  
WC1N 3HB  
Helpline: 0845 122 1201  
7-10pm Mon/Tue/Thu  
[www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)

# RELATIONSHIPS, INTIMACY AND ARTHRITIS



ARTHRITIS CARE

*Empowering  
people with arthritis.*

**Arthritis Care is the UK's largest charity working with and for all people who have arthritis.**

Our information, website and professional helpline are tools to enable people to make positive choices.

Providing you with this booklet costs Arthritis Care £1.10. Any donation you can make towards the costs will help us continue to offer high quality information.

All our information is available for free online. If you can, please help us save money and the environment by downloading at [www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

## **Get in touch with us**

- Our helpline offers confidential information and support.  
Call free on 0808 800 4050 (10am-4pm weekdays) or email [Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk)

## **Arthritis Care contact numbers:**

**UK Head Office: 020 7380 6500**

<b>South England:</b>	<b>0844 888 2111</b>	<b>Central England:</b>	<b>0115 952 5522</b>
<b>North England:</b>	<b>01924 882150</b>	<b>Scotland:</b>	<b>0141 954 7776</b>
<b>Northern Ireland:</b>	<b>028 9078 2940</b>	<b>Wales:</b>	<b>029 2044 4155</b>

**[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)**

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