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Arthritis Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 060

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Introduction

Arthritis is a common condition that affects the joints and can cause pain, stiffness, swelling and reduced movement. There are many different types of arthritis, with **osteoarthritis** and **rheumatoid arthritis** among the most common. The condition can affect people of any age but is particularly common among older adults.

Arthritis can make everyday activities more difficult, including walking, dressing, washing, eating, gripping objects and getting in or out of a chair or bed. Symptoms can vary considerably between individuals and may also fluctuate from day to day.

Care staff play an important role in helping individuals living with arthritis maintain their independence, manage everyday activities safely and remain involved in decisions about their care. Patient, person-centred support can help reduce unnecessary dependence while promoting dignity, confidence and quality of life.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding arthritis awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise common symptoms such as joint pain, stiffness and swelling.
- Understand how arthritis may affect mobility and everyday activities.
- Recognise that pain and ability can vary from day to day.
- Support safe movement and mobility in accordance with the individual's care plan.
- Encourage independence rather than automatically completing tasks for the individual.
- Allow sufficient time for personal care and everyday activities.
- Recognise the impact that persistent pain and fatigue can have on wellbeing.
- Observe changes in mobility, pain or joint function and report concerns promptly.
- Provide compassionate, dignified and person-centred support.

Key Message

Arthritis affects every individual differently. **Do not assume that a person cannot perform an activity simply because they have arthritis.**

By allowing sufficient time, encouraging safe independence, following individual care plans and recognising changes in pain or mobility, care staff can help individuals living with arthritis maintain their dignity, confidence and quality of life.

Understanding Arthritis

Arthritis is a term used for conditions that affect the joints and surrounding tissues. Different types of arthritis have different causes and treatments, but common symptoms can include pain, stiffness, swelling and difficulty moving the affected joints.

Two common types are:

Osteoarthritis – occurs when changes within a joint affect the cartilage and surrounding tissues. It commonly affects joints such as the knees, hips and hands.

Rheumatoid arthritis – an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the lining of the joints, causing inflammation, pain and swelling. It can affect several joints and may also cause fatigue and other symptoms.

Care staff do not need to diagnose the type of arthritis. Their role is to understand how the condition affects the individual and provide support according to their care plan.

How Arthritis May Affect Everyday Life

Depending on the joints affected, an individual may experience difficulty with:

- Walking, standing or using stairs.
- Getting in and out of bed or a chair.
- Washing, bathing and dressing.
- Fastening buttons or using zips.
- Holding cutlery, cups or other objects.
- Opening containers, doors or packaging.
- Preparing and eating meals.
- Completing household or recreational activities.
- Sleeping comfortably because of pain or stiffness.

Pain and stiffness may be worse at particular times, and an individual's abilities can vary from one day to another.

Supporting Independence

Care staff can support individuals living with arthritis by:

- Allowing sufficient time for activities without rushing.
- Encouraging the individual to do as much as safely possible for themselves.
- Following agreed mobility and moving and handling guidance.
- Ensuring prescribed mobility aids or assistive equipment are available and used correctly.
- Positioning frequently used items within comfortable reach where appropriate.
- Supporting prescribed pain-management arrangements within the limits of the care worker's role.
- Recognising when pain, stiffness or fatigue is affecting the person's abilities.
- Listening to the individual and adapting support according to their needs and preferences.
- Reporting significant changes in pain, mobility or ability to complete everyday activities.

Remember

Supporting independence does not mean expecting someone to struggle without assistance.

Good person-centred care means finding the right balance between providing necessary support and allowing the individual to retain as much independence as safely possible.

Pain, stiffness and fatigue can fluctuate, so the level of assistance a person needs today may be different from what they needed yesterday.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in supporting individuals living with arthritis to remain as comfortable, mobile and independent as possible. Because symptoms can fluctuate, support should always reflect the individual's current abilities, preferences and agreed care plan.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Follow the individual's care plan and any agreed mobility or moving and handling guidance.
- Encourage independence while providing assistance when it is genuinely needed.
- Allow sufficient time for movement, personal care and everyday activities.
- Ensure prescribed mobility aids and assistive equipment are available and used correctly.
- Observe for changes in pain, stiffness, swelling or mobility.
- Support prescribed pain-management arrangements only within the limits of your training, competence and authorised role.
- Never alter medication or treatment independently.
- Consider how fatigue may affect the individual's abilities throughout the day.
- Record relevant observations accurately and report significant changes promptly.
- Work within the limits of your role and seek advice whenever you are unsure.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if:

- Joint pain becomes significantly worse or is no longer adequately controlled.
- There is new or increased swelling, redness or warmth around a joint.
- The individual experiences a sudden or significant reduction in mobility.
- They are struggling with everyday activities they could previously manage.
- Pain or stiffness is affecting eating, drinking, personal care or sleep.
- There is an increase in falls or difficulty maintaining balance.
- The individual develops new weakness or appears generally unwell.
- Prescribed pain relief appears ineffective or the individual repeatedly refuses medication.
- You notice any other significant change from the person's usual condition.

A **suddenly hot, swollen and very painful joint**, particularly if the person is also feverish or generally unwell, requires prompt medical assessment.

Supporting Comfort and Wellbeing

Living with persistent pain and reduced mobility can affect more than physical health. Individuals may become frustrated, anxious, withdrawn or less willing to participate in activities.

Care staff can help by:

- Listening to the individual's concerns and taking reports of pain seriously.
- Offering choices and involving the person in decisions about their care.
- Encouraging appropriate activity and participation according to the care plan.
- Allowing rest when fatigue or discomfort increases.
- Helping the individual use agreed equipment or adaptations that make everyday activities easier.
- Recognising changes in mood or wellbeing and reporting concerns where appropriate.

Good Practice Reminder

Arthritis should not automatically mean loss of independence.

By providing the **right amount of support at the right time**, allowing individuals to work at their own pace and recognising changes in pain or mobility promptly, care staff can help people living with arthritis remain active, involved and as independent as safely possible.

Summary

Arthritis is a common condition that can affect mobility, comfort, independence and many everyday activities. Symptoms such as pain, stiffness, swelling and fatigue can vary considerably between individuals and may fluctuate from day to day.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with arthritis by encouraging safe independence, allowing sufficient time for activities, following mobility and pain-management plans and recognising changes promptly. Support should always reflect the individual's abilities, preferences and agreed care plan.

Arthritis Awareness Checklist

✓ Follow the individual's care plan and agreed mobility guidance.

✓ Allow sufficient time for movement and everyday activities.

✓ Encourage independence while providing appropriate assistance when needed.

✓ Be aware that pain, stiffness and fatigue may fluctuate.

✓ Ensure prescribed mobility aids and assistive equipment are available and used correctly.

✓ Observe for changes in joint pain, swelling, stiffness or mobility.

✓ Support prescribed pain-management arrangements only within your authorised role.

✓ Never independently alter medication or treatment.

✓ Record relevant observations accurately and report significant changes promptly.

✓ Treat every individual with dignity, patience and respect.

Further Information

For further guidance on arthritis, visit:

NHS – Arthritis
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/arthritis/

Versus Arthritis
https://www.versusarthritis.org/

NICE – Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Conditions
https://www.nice.org.uk

Care Quality Commission (CQC)
https://www.cqc.org.uk

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- Resource 018 – Supporting Independence in Care Settings
- Resource 020 – Pressure Ulcer Prevention Awareness
- Resource 022 – Recognising and Responding to Pain in Care Settings
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
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