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TIPS FOR LIVING BETTER WITH ARTHRITIS



OUR EXPERT:

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CAN SMOKING MAKE MY KNEE PAIN WORSE?

Q I have knee OA that has been giving me more pain than usual. My daughter says I should give up my five-cigarettes-a-day habit. Is she right? Can quitting smoking help my pain?

A Your daughter is absolutely right. Among the well-known reasons to stop smoking (increased risk of cancer, heart disease), another is to help slow the progression of osteoarthritis and reduce chronic pain. In fact, researchers have found that men who smoke have increased cartilage loss and severe pain in the knee. The likely reason? Smoking reduces blood flow to the small vessels that feed the cartilage in the knee, slowing down or blocking the knee's ability to heal. This same effect applies to all the other joints in the body, as well as the intervertebral discs in the neck and back. If you need help, ask your doctor about a smoking-cessation program that might work for you.

BEST MATTRESS FOR BACK PAIN

Q I've been suffering from low back pain for years, and decided it's time to invest in a new mattress. What can I do when trying out mattresses in the store to make sure I make the right choice?

A Choosing the right mattress, especially for someone with chronic back pain, should be a

significant and well-thought out process. When lying on mattresses in the store, make sure to replicate the positions and types of pillows you use at home to best simulate your sleeping experience. However, any amount of time spent trying out mattresses in a store cannot compare to spending a full night's sleep on it in your own home. So make sure your mattress store or manufacturer allows you to return or exchange the mattress if you are not fully satisfied. A full week's trial should be sufficient to determine if the mattress can help your pain, but take as long as the return/exchange policy will allow.

SHOTS FOR SCIATICA?

Q My sciatica pain has responded to cortisone shots in the past two years. I've had about three, but some people tell me you can't keep getting them. Why is that?

A Sciatica pain is caused by spinal nerves that are pinched or inflamed as they exit the spine. Cortisone, or epidural steroid, shots injected directly into the affected area help reduce the inflammation, without causing an excessive buildup of steroids in the rest of the body. However, because there's concern that the steroids can cause cartilage to deteriorate, it's generally recommended that injections to the same area be limited to three a year. If the pain is still not tolerable at that rate, other treatments should be explored. 