

### ***Active Living with Arthritis Podcast #13***

## **Creating a Safer Home: Useful Equipment and Strategies for Household Activities**

Karen: Welcome to another Active Living with Arthritis podcast, presented by ENACT center at Boston University as part of our Interact with ENACT series. We're here to bring you evidence-based information related to arthritis and rehabilitation. Make sure to subscribe to our podcasts to receive episodes as they're produced. I'm Dr. Karen Jacobs, an Occupational Therapist and professor in occupational therapy at Boston University, and your host for this podcast about home modifications. Today, I'm here with Amber Steckel and Kaitlin Thompson, candidates for the Doctor of Physical Therapy degree at Boston University. Today, we will be discussing the seriousness of falls in the arthritis population, and giving you things that you can do in your home to help prevent falls.

Kaitlin, what evidence is there relating falls to people with arthritis?

Kaitlin: Well, 1 in 3 people over the age of 65 fall every year, and people with arthritis are even more likely than their age-matched peers to experience a fall. In fact, regardless of age, about 15% of people with knee osteoarthritis fall each year. Falls can result in a variety of serious consequences including hip, wrist, and spine fracture, brain damage, and soft tissue injury. These can lead to hospitalization, long-term care in a hospital or nursing home, loss of independence, and depression. In fact, 33% of people who fall will never regain their previous level of function.

Karen: Kaitlin, that's pretty scary. Amber, what can people do to help prevent falls?

Amber: Well, lots of research has been done on ways to prevent falls, and many factors can contribute to a person falling. Among these risk factors are taking more than four medications, poor vision, and decreased strength and balance. Make sure to review your medications with your doctor, and get your vision checked every year. Some people may also benefit from a physical therapy evaluation and treatment for issues in strength and balance. These are all factors

that apply to an individual person. However, things in the environment, like at home or outside, can also put a person at risk for a fall. Statistics show that one of the most common places to fall is inside the home. The good news is, there are many things you can do in your house to help prevent falls.

Karen: That is good news. In order to prevent falls, all of those factors should be addressed. In this podcast, however, we will only be focusing on ways to change your home. Kaitlin, can you start us off with some general recommendations for around the house?

Kaitlin: Sure. First, remove or tack down any loose rugs or mats. Loose rugs are commonly found in the living room and hallway. Mats are usually by sinks, around toilets, and by the shower or bathtub. These can slip around when you step on them and cause a fall. Second, examine your carpets and identify areas where there are wrinkles or bubbles, which can cause you to trip. If you notice any, consult with your local carpet installation company to tighten up the carpet. Third, make sure there is good lighting throughout the house. Place night-lights in frequently used places at night, like the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. If lamps or light switches are in hard-to-reach places, consider investing in an automatic light like motion sensor or clap-on, or a light with a timer. Lastly, make sure there are clear pathways throughout the house by minimizing clutter and tacking down loose electrical cords. Also, be aware of door thresholds, they can also cause you to trip.

Karen: Kaitlin, those are some great tips. I know stairs can be particularly tough to tackle for people with arthritis. Amber, what can you recommend in relationship to stairs?

Amber: First, we need to make sure that the stairs are safe. Like Kaitlin said, make sure there are no loose mats or carpets on or around the stairs, especially near the bottom of the stairs. If you have carpet on the stairs, make sure it is secure by looking for wrinkles and bubbles. If your stairs are bare, put non-skid strips at the edge of each stair to help prevent slipping. If possible, install railings on both sides

of the stairs at hip height. With a little work, and maybe some instruction from hardware store employees, you could do it yourself, or you could also call your local contractor.

Karen: That's great. Now, Kaitlin, what can you recommend for people if they have trouble going up and down the stairs?

Kaitlin: Just remember the old adage, up with the good and down with the bad. That is, when going up the stairs, start with the less painful leg, and follow with the more painful leg. Do the opposite going down stairs: start with the more painful leg, and follow with the less painful leg. Up with the good, down with the bad.

Karen: Great. That sounds easy to remember, and it's good to know. I know cooking and cleaning in the kitchen can be problematic for some people. Amber, what kind of modifications do you recommend for people in the kitchen?

Amber: We recommend keeping frequently used items, like pots, pans, and dishes, in easy-to-reach places. That way you aren't climbing on chairs or stools, or bending over to get things in low cabinets. If you do need to get something up high, do NOT stand on a chair. Use a step-stool that has a bar at the top to help hold on and keep your balance. Avoid carrying heavy things, like large pots of boiling water. Instead, cook smaller portions, or place the pot or dish on a potholder, and then slide it across the counter.

Karen: That's a really good tip, I might even use at home for myself. I know one of the most common places to fall is the bathroom, which is why it's especially important to make this room safe. Kaitlin, what can you tell us about making the bathroom safer?

Kaitlin: There are many things you can use to make bathroom activities safer and easier. You can use a long-handled sponge to wash hard-to-reach places like your feet and back. You can use soap dispensers to avoid having to reach down and

pick up dropped soap. You can install grab bars or rails to help steady yourself getting in and out of the shower. If you have to step over a tub threshold to get inside the shower, consider using a step-stool with a bar on top, like in the kitchen. Make sure you have non-skid mats on the floor of the shower and/or tub to prevent slipping. Be sure the shower door or curtain effectively keeps water inside the shower so that the floor of the bathroom does not become wet and slippery. If standing up from the toilet is difficult, you can consider using a raised toilet seat. All of this equipment can be found at most home supply stores for a reasonable price.

Karen: That's a lot of very important information. You mentioned that some people might have trouble standing up from the toilet. Does that mean that they may also have trouble standing from a chair or a couch?

Kaitlin: That's a good point, Karen, and you're absolutely right. The reason why standing up from a toilet may be difficult or painful is that toilets are often low to the ground. When you stand up from a low chair or an especially squishy couch, more force is put through the knees, creating pain and irritation. If this is a problem for you, try using higher chairs or couches, or make these things higher by using chair risers or extra cushions. Some other good ideas are to sit in chairs with arms, and to sit at the *end* of the couch, rather than in the *middle*, so that you can use your arms and not just your legs to stand up.

Karen: That's some really good advice. Along the same lines, it can often be difficult or painful for people with arthritis to lift and carry things through the house. Amber, do you have any tips for people who have problems with lifting?

Amber: Yes. Some general things to keep in mind about lifting are to keep your feet spread at least shoulder-width apart, and to test the load before you lift it to see if it is unstable or too heavy. If the load is too heavy, take multiple trips with a few items at a time or ask someone to help you. If picking things up off the floor is difficult, try using a reacher, which is a stick with a handle and a claw to help you pick things up. Or you can try the golfers' lift. To perform the golfers' lift, put one

hand on a counter or another sturdy object, and stand on the opposite foot. Using your free hand, reach down and lift the non-standing leg up while keeping the standing leg slightly bent. This takes stress off the knee when lifting. However, it does put more stress through the back, so this lift technique might not be appropriate for people with back pain. Lastly, always remember to clear a path for where you plan to take the item before you lift it up. This way, you aren't trying to move things out of the way, or get around them, while holding something heavy.

Karen: Amber, that was great. Kaitlin, are there any other tips or devices people can use around the house?

Kaitlin: Of course! Many people use walls, furniture, and counters for extra support when walking around the house. This practice is very unsafe, as these objects can be unstable, and your hand can easily slip, causing a fall. If you are one of these people, consider using a cane or walker to help you get around more safely. Using a cane on the opposite side of the most painful joint, or a walker for extra support, decreases the load carried through the joint. This can decrease pain and enable you to walk further without stopping. Additionally, one of the most important things to remember when walking around your house, is to ALWAYS wear shoes. Studies show that you are far more likely to fall in bare feet, or while wearing only socks or slippers. We recommend that you wear low-heeled shoes with slip-resistant soles both inside and outside the house.

Karen: This is so interesting, I didn't know wearing shoes was so important. Amber, do you have anything else to add before we wrap up?

Amber: One last thing to keep in mind is when your symptoms come on. You can track when your symptoms worsen by recording the activities you do each day along with your pain level at different times of the day. This can be done manually, or with smartphone apps, which we discussed in an earlier ENACT podcast. This way, you can know what brings on your pain, and can either avoid it or find different ways to do those things. If you find that your joints get stiff after sitting for a certain period of time, make sure to move them around BEFORE that

happens. One way to do this is by bending and straightening your knees every 10-15 minutes while sitting, which helps to lubricate them. If you have been sitting still for a while, try to stand slowly and make sure your knee feels good before walking around.

Karen: What an informative podcast. We did cover a lot today, so please refer to our show notes if you have any questions. There, you can also find more information about all different types of equipment we mentioned, as well as a more detailed descriptions and picture diagrams of the golfer's lift. We hope you enjoyed this podcast, thanks for listening! If you'd like to offer feedback, ask questions, or let us know of topics that you're interested in, please send an email to enact (e-n-a-c-t) @ bu.edu. On our website, [www.bu.edu/enact](http://www.bu.edu/enact), has copies of today's show notes, information about the center, and a list of online resources. In our next podcast, we'll be discussing several myths associated with arthritis, including joint pain, braces, diet, and weather. Make sure to subscribe to our podcast to receive new episodes of Active Living with Arthritis as they're produced. And stay active!