Working with your healthcare team

ARTHRITIS INFORMATION SHEET

There is a range of healthcare professionals who may be involved in helping you manage your arthritis. This sheet outlines what each member of your healthcare team does and how to find them. It also includes tips on getting the most from a visit to your health professional.

General practitioner (GP or local doctor)

Your GP is usually your main provider of health care. He or she should be your first point of contact for any concerns you have about your arthritis or other health issues. Your GP can help you coordinate your overall health care, including making referrals to specialists if needed. Your GP may also have a practice nurse. A practice nurse can provide information and coordinate your care with the other members of your healthcare team.

Medical specialists

Your GP can refer you to an appropriate specialist. Your GP may recommend a specialist for you, or you may wish to choose your own. Most specialists see patients either at public hospitals or in private clinics. They may charge a fee for your appointment if working outside the public hospital system. Check the likely costs when making an appointment. If cost is a problem, discuss this with your GP.

- **Rheumatologist:** A rheumatologist is a doctor who specialises in diagnosis and medical treatment of joint, muscle and bone disorders. You may be referred to a rheumatologist if the cause of your symptoms is unclear or if you have a type of arthritis that needs specialist care. For more information, including how to find a rheumatologist, contact the Australian Rheumatology Association on (02) 9252 2334 or visit www.rheumatology.org.au
- **Orthopaedic surgeon:** An orthopaedic surgeon specialises in diagnosis and surgical treatment of bone, muscle and joint disorders. The surgeon will discuss your need for surgery and other management options with you. For more information about orthopaedic surgeons and how to find one contact the Australian Orthopaedic Association on (02) 8071 8000 or visit www.aoa.org.au

Allied health professionals

The following health professionals may also help you manage your arthritis:

- **Dietitians** are experts in food and nutrition. They provide advice about healthy eating, weight loss and diets for medical conditions, such as diabetes. To find a dietitian contact the Dietitians Association of Australia on 1800 812 942 or use the 'find a dietitian' service at www.daa.asn.au
- **Exercise physiologists** can give you advice about exercise, including the best types of exercise for your health and ability. To find an exercise physiologist contact Exercise and Sports Science Australia on (07) 3862 4122 or use the 'find an exercise physiologist' feature at www.essa.org.au
- **Occupational therapists** (OT) can show you ways to make activities of daily living, such as cooking and showering, easier and provide advice on useful aids or equipment. To find an OT contact Occupational Therapy Australia on 1300 682 878 or use the 'find an OT' feature at www.otaus.com.au
- Pharmacists can help you to understand your medicines (both prescription and over-the-counter medicines) and how to use them safely and correctly.
- **Physiotherapists** can advise you on exercise, posture and ways to relieve pain. They may also use treatments to keep your joints and muscles flexible. To find a physiotherapist contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'find a physio' feature at www.physiotherapy.asn.au
- **Podiatrists** specialise in conditions affecting the feet. They can help you with footwear, nail care and orthoses (shoe inserts). To find a podiatrist contact the Australasian Podiatry Council on (03) 9416 3111 or use the 'find a podiatrist' feature at www.apodc.com.au

- **Psychologists** can teach you ways to cope with any pain and difficult emotions you feel as a result of your arthritis. To find a psychologist contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 or visit www.psychology.org.au
- **Rheumatology Nurses** are nurses with a specialist knowledge in arthritis. They can provide you with education, support and advice on your diagnosis and on-going management of your disease. For more information, please ask your rheumatologist.

Where can I see allied health professionals and how much will it cost?

If your GP refers you to a health professional as part of a care plan, you may be able to have five sessions per year funded by Medicare. Ask your GP for more information.

- **The public system:** Most health professionals are available in the public health system (eg. community health centre or public hospital). There is often a waiting list, and you will usually need a referral from your GP. Their services are usually free or low cost.
- **The private system:** You can consult any of these health professionals at private clinics without a referral from your GP. The cost of a private consultation varies with the type of health professional and may cost from $30 to $100. These costs may be covered in part by private health insurance.

Be prepared

To get the most out of a visit to your doctor or other health professional it is important to be prepared.

Here are some tips:

- Think about, and write down, the questions you want to ask before your visit.
- Always take x-rays and test results related to your condition to the consultation.
- Consider taking a family member or friend with you as a second set of ears.
- Ask your doctor or health professional to explain any information that you did not understand.
- Feel free to ask questions, especially about the benefits, side effects and costs of treatments.
- Tell your doctor or health professional if you need time to think or to discuss something with family members.
- Write down any important information or instructions that you are given.
- Ask your doctor or health professional where you can learn more about your condition or treatment.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Your healthcare team can help you manage your arthritis. Learn ways to work effectively with your healthcare team.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Websites:

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHRMC) 2006, Making decisions about tests and treatments: Principles for better communication between healthcare consumers and healthcare professionals.	Ring 1300 064 672 or visit www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications for a copy.

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