

Managing arthritis in the USA



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On March 7, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued new data on the prevalence of arthritis in the USA. More than 54 million adults (23%) in the USA report arthritis diagnosed by a doctor, and almost 60% are of working age (18–64 years old). 24 million adults with arthritis report that the disease limits their daily activities, which represents an increase of about 20% since 2002. Most have osteoarthritis, but rheumatoid arthritis, gout, lupus, and fibromyalgia are other common diagnoses in the report.

The burden of arthritis goes well beyond pain, stiffness, swelling, and restricted movement of a joint. Difficulties in lifting a grocery bag, walking to the car, holding a cup, and bending or kneeling are common. Comorbidity with heart disease, diabetes, or obesity is particularly high, leading to further restrictions in activity for many, and a downward spiral of ill health. Work becomes impossible for many with severe arthritis, and mental health disorders are common, with a third of those aged 45 years or more with arthritis also reporting anxiety or depression.

For the CDC report see https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6609e1.htm?s_cid=mm6609e1_w

Poor management is common, with many arthritis sufferers prescribed opioids, contributing to the opioid misuse epidemic in the USA. Safer, effective, disease-specific options exist. Pain, fear of pain, and lack of knowledge about what exercise is safe all limit activity. Regular physical activity can reduce pain and improve function in some patients, while recognising that a quarter of all patients with arthritis have severe joint pain, and some are almost immobile. Analgesia with paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, cognitive behavioural therapy, self-management programmes, and surgery offer alternative therapeutic options.

Health providers can do more for patients with arthritis by encouraging self-management and appropriate physical activities, while adhering to best prescribing practices. Primary prevention opportunities in most types of arthritis are few in many cases, but diet, weight management, diabetes prevention and control, and maintenance of cardiovascular health can all contribute to arthritis symptom management and improve overall health. ■ *The Lancet*

Phasing out harmful use of pesticides



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“If we are going to live so intimately with these chemicals—eating and drinking them, taking them into the very marrow of our bones—we had better know something about their nature and their power”, wrote environmentalist Rachel Carson in 1962 in her book *Silent Spring*, which hauntingly described the damaging effects of indiscriminate pesticide use in agriculture on animals and people in the USA. 55 years later, a new report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and the UN Special Rapporteur on toxics, presented to the Human Rights Council on March 7, details the health and environmental effects of excessive pesticide use globally.

Chronic exposure to pesticides has been linked to several diseases and conditions including cancer, developmental disorders, and sterility. Populations such as farmers and agricultural workers and those living near plantations, especially pregnant women and children, are particularly vulnerable to exposure from these chemicals. Additionally, pesticides are responsible for an estimated 200 000 acute self-poisonings worldwide each year.

The report dispels the idea promulgated by the agrochemical industry that intensive use of pesticides is needed to feed the growing global population. Instead, it notes that excessive use can damage the ecological systems that support food production. It states that it is possible to produce higher yields of food in the long term without or with minimal use of toxic chemicals.

The UN rapporteurs are damning about the “aggressive, unethical marketing tactics” of the pesticides industry and the money spent on influencing policy makers and disputing scientific evidence. They call for a new global treaty to regulate and phase out the use of hazardous pesticides in farming. Such an international pact would be a welcome addition to efforts towards a more sustainable future but it will take time to form, especially considering the likelihood of industry opposition to it. More immediately, much more can be done nationally to strengthen existing weak regulations on the use and safety of these chemicals to protect the health of populations and the environments that they depend on. ■ *The Lancet*

For the UN rapporteurs’ joint statement to the Human Rights Council see <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21306&LangID=E>

For the UN rapporteurs’ report on pesticides see <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/017/85/PDF/G1701785.pdf?OpenElement>