

# Talking with an Occupational Therapist

Arthritis, a condition that can reduce strength and mobility for completing routine chores, is a pain to farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers. Arthritis is one of the most common disabling conditions, and it especially affects farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers due to the physical nature of their work, which may include climbing steps, driving a tractor, baling hay, moving livestock, or bending down frequently when milking dairy cows.

The term arthritis refers to more than 100 different ailments known as rheumatic diseases. The most common types are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, bursitis, and tendonitis.

Osteoarthritis causes the breakdown of the smooth, gliding surface of a joint, known as cartilage. When cartilage is destroyed, raw bone surfaces rub together and the bone ends may thicken and form boney overgrowth called spurs.

For farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers frequent lifting of heavy objects, repeated use of vibrating machinery or constant bending to perform certain tasks can add to the stress on joints and set the stage for osteoarthritis, particularly of weight-bearing joints.

Many everyday tasks that were once simple are now painful and tiring. Working in agriculture is different from other occupations because certain tasks cannot wait to be completed. Asking and getting help from others is often limited; and changing careers is not possible nor, is it a realistic and practical solution.

Farmers or ranchers with arthritis may relate more clearly to the abilities they used to have and may perceive themselves as still having those same abilities. Therefore, farmers and ranchers with arthritis need to recognize the exact nature of their limitations and adjust accordingly.

Arthritis can make it hard for farmers to complete their everyday chores. Therefore, it is critical that you find resources or professionals that can help. Occupational Therapists provide services that can make living with arthritis more manageable.

Occupational Therapists (OTs) are health professionals that help farmers to lead productive, fulfilling, and meaningful lives in spite of injuries, illnesses, or disabilities. Arthritis, like any condition, can make daily tasks difficult to impossible to do depending on the severity of the symptoms. However, an OT can teach you different strategies and recommend great tools to help you live, work, and play in spite of arthritis.

**NIDRR Funded MARRTC Farming with Arthritis Project**  
**Amanda Cochran, MOTS**

Agricultural Engineering Extension: Karen Funkenbusch and Dr. Willard Downs  
MU Department of Physical Therapy: Dr. Marina Minor, PT

## **Reap the Benefits: OTs can help!**

- Educate you about arthritis and how you can be an effective self-manager of this disease.
- Come up with ways to help you continue to participate in everyday tasks.
- Evaluate your work and home environments and recommend helpful modifications.
  - Potential Problem 1: Arthritis makes it difficult to pick up gates to open and close them.
    - Possible Practical Solution 1: Add wheels to the bottom of gate so that you can move them with less effort or mount the gate up on hinges.
  - Potential Problem 2: Arthritis of the hands makes it difficult to open standard door knobs.
    - Possible Practical Solution 2: Install door knob adapters.
- Suggest energy conservation strategies that will help you get the most out of your day.
  - Potential Problem: Your arthritic joints are no longer able to keep up with the demands of repetitive physical labor.
    - Possible Solution: Break up your labor intensive work with easier tasks to help your energy last all day.
- Recommend adaptive equipment or assistive technology.
  - Potential Problem: Knee or hip osteoarthritis can make climbing on farm equipment painful.
    - Possible Solution 1: Install an extra step to the farm equipment.
    - Possible Solution 2: Install a lift system.
- Make splints or suggest ways to maintain better joint positioning in order to decrease unnecessary stress on joints and/or rest painful joints.
- Develop safe exercise programs.
  - Potential Problem: Farmers with osteoarthritis stop using the impaired joint and lose muscle strength and range of motion.

**NIDRR Funded MARRTC Farming with Arthritis Project**  
**Amanda Cochran, MOTS**

Agricultural Engineering Extension: Karen Funkenbusch and Dr. Willard Downs  
MU Department of Physical Therapy: Dr. Marina Minor, PT

- Possible Solution: Participate in recommended exercise programs to maintain muscle strength and overall range of motion.
- Recommend coping strategies in order to emotionally deal with having a chronic condition.
- Recommend additional resources.

Occupational Therapists work in a variety of settings including hospitals, clinics, and home health agencies. A doctor's order is required before you can see an OT. Your initial meeting with an Occupational Therapist will be focused on identifying what activities you are having problems with and establishing why the problem is occurring. For example, is it due to increased pain, decreased strength and endurance, or limited range of motion? After establishing why these tasks are problematic, the OT will work with you to customize a specific plan that meets your unique needs. Goals will be made and subsequent treatment sessions will be scheduled.