

Dead of winter is tough on arthritis sufferers

November 4 2011, By Erin White

As cold winter weather sets in and daylight hours dwindle, many older Chicagoans with arthritis tend to sit idle, missing out on the daily dose of physical activity they need to improve their health, according to a Northwestern Medicine study.

“We found that there’s a huge difference in trying to get these patients to be active in the winter and trying to get them to be active in the summer,” said Joe Feinglass, a research professor of [medicine](#) at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

Results of the study, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, also highlight a lack of indoor recreational facilities for elderly, lower-income people in urban areas that experience extreme weather, Feinglass said.

“Chicago has indoor ‘exercise deserts,’ just like we have food deserts, making it difficult for low-income seniors, like many in our study, to get the physical activity they need,” said Feinglass, lead author of the study. “Even modest reductions in activity can have serious [health](#) consequences for people with arthritis.”

[Chicago Weather Affects Physical Activity](#) from [Northwestern News](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Researchers analyzed Chicago’s daily weather conditions and the amount of daylight from sunrise to sunset every day, over the three-year period of the study. They tracked the nearly 250 participants’ physical activity

with an accelerometer, a small, sophisticated device that looks like a pedometer.

The participants, most over 60, all with documented knee osteoarthritis or a rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis, wore the accelerometer during waking hours, up to six times a week, at three to six months intervals, in all different types of Chicago weather.

Weather extremes, such as cold days with average daily temperature below 20 degrees or hot days, with daily average temperature over 75, kept participants inside and inactive for an additional hour a day, but the amount of daylight hours played the most significant role in derailing physical activity routines.

“The lack of daylight hours in the winter had a huge effect on the participants,” Feinglass said. “There’s more than a three-hour difference in the amount of completely sedentary time each day, where people are just sitting around doing nothing, during the months with less daylight, such as November, versus June.”

The federal guidelines recommend that adults with arthritis participate in 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity, low-impact activity. That amounts to an average of slightly more than 20 minutes per day. It’s not the kind of physical activity that requires an expensive gym membership, but, unless they engage in TV or taped exercise programs, it usually means a brisk walk, not something many want to do outdoors in the dead of winter, Feinglass said.

“We spend an enormous amount of money on outdoor activities in the summer months for younger and healthier people,” he said. “We need to design more public access opportunities for older people to be more physically active indoors, in the winter.”

The title of the paper is “The Effects of Daily Weather on Accelerometer-Measured [Physical Activity](#).” The study was funded by National Institute of [Arthritis](#) Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.

Provided by Northwestern University

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