



# Montana Veterans Benefit from Walk With Ease

VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH SYSTEM SUBSEQUENTLY OFFERS PROGRAM TO EMPLOYEES

Physical activity helps ease arthritis pain, yet nearly a third of adults with arthritis are physically inactive.

## Challenge

In Montana, 27% of adults and 36% of veterans have arthritis. The high incidence of arthritis among veterans is often due to traumatic and overuse injuries from activity duty. Of Montanans with arthritis, half have activity limitations, and nearly a quarter have arthritis-related joint pain.

Research recommends self-efficacy and self-management programs, such as Walk With Ease (WWE), to manage arthritis. Likewise, physical activity has been proven to improve arthritis symptoms.

The National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD) supports the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Montana Arthritis Program to recruit partners that will implement WWE in workplaces and community programs across Montana.

## Approach

The Veterans Affairs Health System (VA) is a large employer with multiple clinics across Montana. The Montana Arthritis Program and the VA have a long-standing relationship. The Montana Arthritis Program originally pitched the idea of offering WWE to VA employees, but the VA wanted to offer it to veterans first.

Eligible veterans who came to the VA for routine health care services were referred to the WWE program. Spouses were also encouraged to participate. The veterans participated in the group WWE led by a certified WWE leader who also happened to be a VA staff member.

After piloting WWE among veterans and seeing its benefits, the VA began offering the program to employees.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends Walk With Ease, a low-cost six-week walking program, for individuals with musculoskeletal disorders. This program can be integrated into the employer's wellness efforts or can be a walking initiative to:

- Reduce pain
- Improve balance and strength
- Increase physical activity levels



## Results

The Montana Arthritis Program is expanding the availability and accessibility of arthritis appropriate evidence-based interventions (AAEBI) across the state. Additionally, they are working to promote walking to manage arthritis symptoms and increase healthcare provider counseling about the benefits of physical activity and referral to local evidence-based interventions. Finally, the Arthritis Program helped launch WWE group sessions at five VA clinics - one clinic enrolled seven veterans in the summer 2021 session. Two other clinics will offer the session in Fall 2021. One other will begin in January 2022. The remaining clinic is pending on a start date due to COVID-19.

Participating veterans reported that it was nice to have an easy-to-follow physical activity program that provides accountability. They also enjoyed the social connections created by interacting with other veterans.

Seeing the positive impact of WWE on veterans helped the VA decide to offer WWE as a worksite wellness program. Offering the self-directed WWE option allows employees to participate in the six-week program and, rather than be limited by a class time, work through the program and walk when it is most suitable for their schedule. The first session, in August 2021, had 29 employees; another began in September 2021 with 32 employees.

Physical activity helps ease arthritis pain, yet nearly a third of adults with arthritis are physically inactive. Physical activity is important for the management of other chronic conditions that are common among adults with arthritis, such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

## Impact of Physical Activity

Physical activity is a way to manage and reduce arthritis pain and decrease the likelihood of activity limitations. CDC, health departments, and national partners promote several physical activity programs to manage arthritis symptoms. These programs are designed to engage people of all ages and fitness levels in helping reduce arthritis pain and minimize activity limitations so they can have a better quality of life.



Through their diligence in developing a relationship with VA leadership, the Montana Arthritis Program could link veterans first and then VA employees to WWE programming. Despite the pandemic, 68 participants from around the state have already enrolled.

The VA plans to continue offering WWE to veterans and VA employees because of the health benefits and positive outcomes of participating in the program.



*This publication was supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$2,000,000 with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.*