

## **The Impact of Arthritis Foundation Walk With Ease: A Collaborative Effort with Cooperative Extension Programs**

### **Introduction**

Arthritis, a leading cause of disability in the United States, affects over 53.5 million adults, significantly impacting their daily lives. According to a recent patient-reported outcomes survey of more than 60,000 people with arthritis, 49% reported they could not walk for at least 15 minutes or had difficulty doing so. This lack of mobility can significantly hinder an individual's ability to participate in work, family, and social activities. To address this challenge, the Arthritis Foundation recommends the Walk With Ease (WWE) program, an evidence-based self-management program. This impactful program provides a collaboration with state Extension Programs and national partners, creating a powerful network for reaching individuals with arthritis across the country.

### **Cooperative Extension Programs: Ideal Partners for Chronic Disease Management**

The Cooperative Extension Programs, a network of educational outreach organizations in every state and US territory, provides a perfect platform for the WWE program. These programs, known for their practical, research-based education, boast established infrastructure and a trusted network of local educators. They excel at reaching underserved communities and rural areas – populations often disproportionately affected by arthritis. WWE is a physical activity program that is applicable to a range of participants both with and without arthritis. This collaboration allows the WWE program to leverage these strengths, ensuring wider reach and program accessibility.

### **Impactful Collaboration: Reaching a Wider Audience**

The success of the WWE program hinges on the strong collaboration between the Arthritis Foundation, State Health Departments, national partners funded by CDC through DP21-2106 grant, and community-based organizations including local Extension Programs. The Arthritis Foundation provides the program curriculum and resources, while State Health Departments and [CDC-funded arthritis recipients](#) through the DP-23-0001 grant offer expertise and connections. Extension Programs, with their established national network and local presence, become the backbone for program delivery. Trained local Cooperative Extension Program educators and volunteers can effectively conduct group sessions and provide personalized support, while community outreach efforts ensure program awareness in local communities. Additionally, the self-directed and self-directed enhanced options provide for greater flexibility to reach a wider audience. The Walk With Ease program offers both Self-Directed and Self-Directed Enhanced options for individuals who prefer a self-guided walking plan.

The key difference lies in the level of social support:

- **Group:** This format is in-person and meets three times per week for six weeks and is led by an Arthritis Foundation certified leader. Participants receive a guidebook and are led through discussions by the leader covering specified topics related to exercise and arthritis prior to the guided walk.
- **Self-Directed:** This format is completely independent. Participants receive a Walk With Ease guidebook with a six-week walking plan, educational materials, and tips for overcoming challenges. They progress at their own pace following the guidebook's instructions.
- **Self-Directed Enhanced:** This format provides a sense of community while completing the program independently. Participants still use the Walk With Ease guidebook and follow the same six-week plan. However, they join a group of people who start and finish the program together. A designated coordinator keeps the group connected and motivated through regular communication such as emails, phone calls, or online forums.

### RE-AIM Framework: Evaluating Program Success

The RE-AIM framework (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, Maintenance) helps us assess the program's impact. Here is a glimpse of the WWE program's success in 2023:

Metric	Result
Number of Extension Programs Offering WWE	9
State served	9
Sessions Offered (Group, Self-Directed)	47
Total Leaders Trained	95+
Individuals Reached Through WWE	866+

### Marketing and Promotion Best Practices

Building strong partnerships is crucial. Collaborating with community organizations like hospitals, senior centers, and state and local parks allows Extension Programs to leverage their existing networks and communication channels (newsletters, social media, events). For instance, Delaware's "Move More" e-newsletter successfully increased program enrollment by reaching a relevant target audience.



Direct outreach through various marketing channels further expands the program's reach. Utilizing online platforms like social media groups for seniors and program-specific websites alongside offline channels like flyers, newspaper ads, and tabling events at health fairs ensures program visibility across diverse demographics. Combining these strategies, as exemplified by Iowa State's alumni bulletin promotion and Oregon State University's statewide social media campaign, maximizes program awareness and enrollment.

### **Success Stories and Impact**

The WWE program's impact resonates deeply with participants. In Delaware, the program focused on connecting participants with nature while promoting physical activity. Participants reported a newfound appreciation for local green spaces, increased nature awareness, and a stronger connection to the environment. Beyond environmental benefits, the program consistently delivers positive health outcomes. Participants across Extension Program offices reported feeling more confident and motivated to stay active, achieving weight loss goals, and experiencing a post-COVID jumpstart for physical activity. Additionally, the program fosters social connections among participants and empowers them with valuable health information and proper walking techniques. Overall feedback highlights increased energy, reduced anxiety, and a sustained desire to continue walking, a testament to the program's lasting impact.

### **Conclusion**

The Walk With Ease program, through its collaboration with Cooperative Extension Programs, has demonstrably improved the lives of individuals living with arthritis and other chronic conditions. By reaching a broad audience and offering crucial support and resources, the program empowers participants to manage their condition and achieve a better quality of life. The program's proven success in reducing pain, improving physical function, and enhancing overall well-being underscores its value as a cornerstone in chronic disease management. As we move forward, expanding the program to additional Extension Program offices and fostering even stronger collaborations and opportunities for peer leadership and engagement will ensure continued positive impacts on countless individuals across the nation.