



# Exercise helps ease arthritis pain and stiffness

**As you consider starting an arthritis exercise program, understand what's within your limits and what level of exercise is likely to give you results.**

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Exercise is crucial for people with arthritis. It increases strength and flexibility, reduces joint pain, and helps combat fatigue. Of course, when stiff and painful joints are already bogging you down, the thought of walking around the block or swimming a few laps might seem overwhelming.

But you don't need to run a marathon or swim as fast as an Olympic competitor to help reduce arthritis symptoms. Even moderate exercise can ease your pain and help you maintain a healthy weight. When arthritis threatens to immobilize you, exercise keeps you moving. Not convinced? Read on.

Exercise can help you improve your health and fitness without hurting your joints. With your current treatment program, exercise can:

- Strengthen the muscles around your joints
- Help you maintain bone strength
- Give you more energy to get through the day
- Make it easier to get a good night's sleep
- Help you control your weight
- Enhance your quality of life
- Improve your balance

Though you might think exercise will aggravate your joint pain and stiffness, that's not the case. Lack of exercise actually can make your joints even more painful and stiff.

That's because keeping your muscles and surrounding tissue strong is crucial to maintaining support for your bones. Not exercising weakens those supporting muscles, creating more stress on your joints.

Talk to your doctor about fitting exercise into your treatment plan. What types of exercises are best for you depends on your type of arthritis and which joints are involved. Your doctor or a

physical therapist can work with you to find the exercise plan that gives you the most benefit with the least aggravation of your joint pain.

Your doctor or physical therapist can recommend exercises for you, which might include range-of-motion exercises, strengthening exercises, aerobic exercise and other activities.

### **Range-of-motion exercises**

These exercises relieve stiffness and increase your ability to move your joints through their full range of motion. These exercises might include movements such as raising your arms over your head or rolling your shoulders forward and backward. In most cases, these exercises can be done daily.

### **Strengthening exercises**

These exercises help you build strong muscles that help support and protect your joints. Weight training is an example of a strengthening exercise that can help you maintain or increase your muscle strength. Remember to avoid exercising the same muscle groups two days in a row. Rest a day between your workouts, and take an extra day or two if your joints are painful or swollen.

When starting a strength-training program, a three-day-a-week program can help you jump-start your improvement, but two days a week is all you need to maintain your gains.

### **Aerobic exercise**

Aerobic or endurance exercises help with your overall fitness. They can improve your cardiovascular health, help you control your weight and give you more stamina and energy.

Examples of low-impact aerobic exercises that are easier on your joints include walking, bicycling, swimming and using an elliptical machine. Try to work your way up to 150 minutes of moderately intense aerobic exercise per week. You can split that time into 10-minute blocks if that's easier on your joints.

Moderate intensity aerobic exercise is the safest and most effective if it's done most days of the week, but even a couple of days a week is better than no exercise. To determine if you are in the moderate intensity exercise zone, you should be able to carry on a conversation while exercising, though your breathing rate will be increased.

### **Other activities**

Any movement, no matter how small, can help. Daily activities such as mowing the lawn, raking leaves and walking the dog count.

Body awareness exercises, such as gentle forms of yoga or tai chi, can help you improve balance, prevent falls, improve posture and coordination, and promote relaxation. Be sure to tell your instructor about your condition and avoid positions or movements that can cause pain.

Start slowly to ease your joints into exercise if you haven't been active for a while. If you push yourself too hard, you can overwork your muscles and worsen your joint pain.

Consider these tips as you get started:

- **Keep the impact low.** Low impact exercises like stationary or recumbent bicycles, elliptical trainers, or exercise in the water help keep joint stress low while you move.

- **Apply heat.** Heat can relax your joints and muscles and relieve any pain you have before you begin. Heat treatments — warm towels, hot packs or a shower — should be warm, not painfully hot, and should be applied for about 20 minutes.
- **Move gently.** Move your joints gently at first to warm up. You might begin with range-of-motion exercises for five to 10 minutes before you move on to strengthening or aerobic exercises.
- **Go slowly.** Exercise with slow and easy movements. If you feel pain, take a break. Sharp pain and pain that is stronger than your usual joint pain might indicate something is wrong. Slow down if you notice swelling or redness in your joints.
- **Ice afterward.** Apply ice to your joints for up to 20 minutes as needed after activity, especially after activity that causes joint swelling.

Trust your instincts and don't exert more energy than you think your joints can handle. Take it easy and slowly increase your exercise length and intensity as you progress.

You might notice some pain after you exercise if you haven't been active for a while. In general, if you're sore for more than two hours after you exercise, you were probably exercising too strenuously. Talk to your doctor about what pain is normal and what pain is a sign of something more serious.

If you have rheumatoid arthritis, ask your doctor if you should exercise during general or local flares. One option is to work through your joint flares by doing only range-of-motion exercises, just to keep your body moving, or exercising in water to cushion your joints.

Check with your doctor about exercise programs in your area for people with arthritis. Some hospitals, clinics and health clubs offer special programs.

The Arthritis Foundation conducts exercise programs for people with arthritis in many parts of the United States. Programs include exercise classes — in water and on land — and walking groups. Contact your local branch for more information.

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