

FITNESS HEALTH

Exercise as a Treatment for Arthritis

Arthritis literally means "joint inflammation", but generally refers to the more than 100 rheumatic diseases and related conditions that can cause pain, stiffness and swelling in the joints and connective tissues and affects one in every seven Americans of all ages.

While medication may be part of a recommended treatment plan for people with arthritis, a tailored exercise program can help manage pain and fatigue, and preserve joint structure and function. Once you know what type of arthritis you have and understand your symptoms, you, your physician and exercise therapist can develop a balanced program of physical activity to reduce the damaging affects of arthritis and promote overall good health.

Arthritis and Exercise

The stiffness, pain and swelling associated with arthritis can severely reduce the range of motion in joints (the normal distance joints can move in certain directions).

Avoiding physical activity because of pain can lead to significant muscle loss and excessive weight gain. Exercise, as part of a comprehensive arthritis treatment plan, can improve joint mobility, muscle strength, overall physical conditioning and help you maintain a healthy weight.

A tailored exercise program should include a balance of these three types of exercises:

1. Range-of-motion Exercises

To help relieve pain, people with arthritis often keep their affected joints bent -- especially those in the knees, hands and fingers -- because it's more comfortable during the early stages of arthritis. While this may temporarily relieve discomfort, holding a joint in the same position for too long can cause permanent loss of mobility and hinder the ability to perform daily activities.

Range-of-motion exercises (also called stretching or flexibility exercises) help maintain normal joint function. In these groups of exercises, gently straightening and bending the joints in a controlled manner until normal condition affected joints or near-normal range is achieved and maintained.

2. Strengthening Exercises

Strong muscles help keep weak joints stable, comfortable and protected against further damage. There are several types of strengthening exercise that, when performed properly, can maintain or increase supportive muscle tissue without aggravating affected joints.

Some people with arthritis avoid exercise because of joint pain. However, a group of exercises called **isometrics** will help strengthen targeted muscle groups without bending painful joints. Isometrics involve no joint movement, but rather strengthen muscle groups by using an alternating series of isolated muscle flexes and periods of relaxation. We'll talk more about this and in particular, **Muscle Energy** and **Muscle Activation Techniques**, in next month's issue.

Isotonics is another group of exercises that involve joint mobility. However, this group of exercises is more intensive, requires joint movement and achieves strength development through increased repetitions or speed of repetitions, or by introducing light resistance with small dumbbells or stretch bands.

Neither of these types of exercises is better. **Isometrics** works as well for those arthritis sufferers who can't easily use their joints as **isotonics** does for those who have more joint mobility. The use of either depends on the range of motion of the joints.

Hydrotherapy (water therapy) is a program of exercises performed in a large, often heated pool. Hydrotherapy is easier on painful joints because the water takes some of the weight off the affected areas while providing resistance to the muscles.

3. Endurance Exercises

The foundation of endurance training is **aerobic** exercise, which includes any activity that uses large muscle groups, can be maintained continuously for a long period of time and is rhythmic in nature. At first, people with arthritis should perform about 15 minutes of aerobic activity each day (called duration) at least three times a week (called frequency), and then gradually build up to 30 minutes daily.

Walking is one of the easiest aerobic exercise programs to begin because it requires no special skills or equipment other than a good pair of supportive walking shoes, and it's less stressful on joints than running or jogging.

Beginning a New Exercise Program

Regardless of your condition, review exercise options with a physician before beginning any new exercise program. Also, begin new exercise programs under the supervision of a physical, occupational or exercise therapist, one who has experience working with arthritis patients. Next month's article will provide you with several exercise programs, each of which you can discuss with your doctor, physical therapist or exercise professional.

Effective treatment of arthritis should include a comfortable balance of range-of-motion, strengthening and endurance exercises. It's important to begin slowly and choose a program you enjoy so that you maintain it.

Make exercise part of your daily routine so that it becomes a lifetime habit.

<http://www.bodyfixmethod.com/>