

Fit Facts

American
Council on
Exercise

EXERCISE AND ARTHRITIS

Arthritis is becoming more and more common — and not just among the very old. That's the bad news. The good news is that a program of moderate exercise can reduce pain and improve mobility for many of the over 40 million individuals with this degenerative disease.

What Is Arthritis?

Arthritis means inflammation of a joint. Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, is characterized by a progressive loss of cartilage. This degenerative disease is usually limited to a specific area, such as the knees, hips or spine. Common symptoms include joint pain, limited range of motion, and swelling. Rheumatoid arthritis, which is far less common, causes the inner linings of the joints to become inflamed.

How Can Exercise Help?

For many years, doctors have recommended that patients with arthritis engage in flexibility training to help improve range of motion and reduce some of the stiffness in their afflicted joints. In recent years, doctors have also begun to recognize the benefits of cardiovascular exercise and strength training. Not only does a well-rounded exercise program preserve joint range of motion and flexibility but it also reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, increases joint stability, and lessens the physical and psychological pain that often accompanies a diagnosis of arthritis.

Exercising Safely With Arthritis

Before beginning any type of exercise program, talk it over with your physician. He or she may have some specific concerns or considerations you should keep in mind.

The Arthritis Foundation recommends that active range of motion exercises be performed 1-2 times daily. During flare-ups, remember to move slowly and gently and NOT past your usual point of discomfort. A warm environment promotes elasticity and ease of movement. Range of motion exercises, such as shoulder circles, leg swings and lying knee-to-chest pulls, will help limber up those joints that have been stiffened by arthritis and prevent gradual losses in motion.

Depending on the severity of your arthritis, your physician or physical therapist may suggest either isometric or isotonic strengthening exercises. Isometric exercise, such as squeezing your thigh muscle while lying on your back, involves contracting the muscle without moving the joint. Isotonic exercise, such as performing a leg press or



partial chair squat, involves contracting the muscle while moving one or more joints. Many exercises can easily be done at home using light weights or elastic bands.

While flexibility exercises should be done on a daily basis, strength training should be done two to three times per week. Your muscles need time to recover and repair so be sure to take at least one day off in between strength-training workouts. Don't try lifting too much, too soon. If you experience joint pain, lower the resistance or change the exercise. Take your time and build up gradually.

Finally, cardiovascular, or aerobic, exercise that does not involve a lot of impact on the joints is recommended three to five times per week. Walking, which involves little impact and is easy to do anywhere, is one of the best cardiovascular exercises around. Activities such as swimming, water exercise or bicycling are also great options, because they are virtually non-impact.

As with strength training, it is important to approach aerobic exercise slowly and progress gradually. Depending on your current fitness level, you may want to start with as little as two minutes of activity, three times per day and work your way up to a single 20-30 minute session, three to five times per week. Listen to your body. If you experience pain that lasts longer than one hour after exercise or notice increased swelling/weakness and decreased range of motion, modify your exercise routine or check with your healthcare provider. The Arthritis Foundation has developed in-class programs and exercise DVDs to help individuals with arthritis exercise safely and effectively. Go to www.arthritisfoundation.org.

Keep yourself active in a variety of ways and you'll be on your way to greater mobility and better health.

Do What Works for You

Many people with arthritis can excel in a community-based fitness program under the guidance of a knowledgeable and experienced instructor or trainer, such as an ACE-certified fitness professional with a special interest in helping individuals with arthritis. Others may benefit more from a rehabilitation program with a physical therapist. The key is to find what works best for you to adopt a safe, effective, and fun exercise program that will set you on your way to greater mobility and better health.

Resources for More Information

Arthritis Foundation. Exercise and Arthritis. www.arthritis.org/conditions/exercise/default.asp

American College of Rheumatology. Exercise and Arthritis. www.rheumatology.org/public/fact_sheets/exercise_new.asp

The Johns Hopkins Arthritis Center. Role of Exercise in Arthritis. www.hopkins-arthritis.com/jhmi.edu/mngmnt/exercise.html

Medline Plus: Arthritis. www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/arthritis.html

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.

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