

Fit Facts™

FROM THE 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 offset the pain and inconvenience of this indiscriminate disease.

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Arthritis literally 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 hands, shoulders, hips or knees. 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 their arthritic patients engage in flexibility training to help improve their range of motion and reduce some of the stiffness in their afflicted joints. In recent years, many have begun to recognize the benefits of cardiovascular exercise and strength training as well. Not only does a well-rounded exercise program reduce the risk of heart disease and increase mobility, it helps to reduce the psychological and emotional pain that often accompanies the development of any disease or disorder.

EXERCISING SAFELY WITH ARTHRITIS

Before beginning any type of exercise program, it's always a good idea to talk it over with your physician. He or she may have some specific concerns or considerations you should keep in mind for your exercise program.

Every exercise session should begin and end with flexibility and range of motion exercises for the whole body. Take your time with these exercises and never stretch to the point of pain or discomfort. These exercises will help reduce your risk of injury as well as limber up those joints that have been stiffened by arthritis.



Depending on the severity of your arthritis, your physician or physical therapist may suggest either isometric or isotonic exercises. Isometric exercise, such as pushing one palm against the other, involves contracting the muscle without moving the joint. Isotonic exercise, such as a biceps curl, involves contracting the muscle while moving one or more joints. These exercises can easily be done using weights, elastic tubing or exercise bands.

While flexibility exercises should be done on a daily basis, strength training should be done two times per week, three at the most. 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. 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 or bicycling are great options, too, because they are virtually non-impact.

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE

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-minute session, three to five times per week.

Finish every workout with additional stretching. Try to choose exercises that minimize the stress on the most painful joints and you'll be on your way to greater mobility and better health.

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