

Hydrotherapy

We all benefit from regular exercise. For those affected by arthritis, exercise is particularly important, even if it appears at times to exacerbate pain. Even light exercise can help maintain joint mobility and health.

Whether you choose walking, tai chi or water exercises, there are many benefits. Exercise can go a long way to relieve pain and prevent problems associated with arthritis such as joint stiffness, muscle weakness, joint deformity, stress, depression and dependence upon others.

Warm water exercise is an excellent way for those with arthritis to build up strength, ease stiff joints and relax sore muscles. Water's buoyancy greatly reduces the pressure on your joints, making it easier to perform the needed range of motion exercise.

Water exercise is one of the easiest and most enjoyable ways that a person with arthritis can exercise.

Here are some of the benefits particular to water exercise:

- Enables you to exercise without jarring your joints.
- Assists anti-gravity movements such as lifting or jumping.
- Allows a full range of movements of the joints without strain.
- Water properties mean that exercise can be easily adjusted to be more or less difficult.
- Swimming is a non-stressful aerobic exercise.
- Relaxation can help relieve pain. Many people find that floating and gently moving in warm water is a very pleasant and relaxing experience.
- Warm water in a heated swimming pool warms up your muscles and joints so they are more flexible and able to move easily.
- The social contacts made at water exercise classes allow people with arthritis to meet others with similar problems. Being part of an enjoyable group means you are more likely to continue with regular exercise.

Swimming (and other water exercise) has many health benefits. It is enjoyable and especially helps people with arthritis because the joints can be exercised while supported in the water.

TYPES OF EXERCISE

There are three main types of exercise:

Mobility - these exercises are designed to maintain or increase the range of movement in a joint. It is a good idea to take all your joints through their full range of motion every day. Don't fool yourself into believing that simply being active, such as doing housework counts as exercise. Pay special attention to joints that are stiff. They need more exercise. But do not force a stiff joint to move more than it is able.

Strength – these are designed to increase the power of muscles. This will help joints to bear weight, to move objects and to maintain strong, stable joints. Isometric exercises are good strengthening exercises for arthritic joints because they involve tightening muscles without moving the joint.

Fitness/aerobic – these exercises have a beneficial effect on heart and lungs and increases general body fitness. Good examples for people with arthritis are swimming, walking, cycling and dancing. Always progress slowly through these exercises.

Try to perform your exercise program three or four times every week and make sure it includes all of the three categories discussed above. Concentrate on quality rather than quantity. It is better to do less properly than many poorly. Move joints and muscles smoothly, and avoid jerking.

Be aware of pain and swelling, and exercise particularly gently if either is present. Do not continue with an exercise that causes severe pain.

HYDROTHERAPY

Hydrotherapy involves special exercises in a warm-water pool (usually at a temperature of 33-37°C). This is warmer than normal swimming pools. Patients can be referred by their doctor or rheumatology nurse to a physiotherapist who will decide whether or not hydrotherapy is the best form of treatment.

Who benefits most from hydrotherapy

Usually people with arthritis in several joints find most benefit from hydrotherapy. This is because all the joints can be exercised easily in the warm, supportive water. Hydrotherapy also helps people who feel pain when walking, since the water provides extra support.

Hydrotherapy is sometimes also used after joint replacement surgery and for people with back pain or ankylosing spondylitis.

What if I can't swim?

You do not have to be able to swim to have hydrotherapy. The pool is quite shallow so you can exercise well within your depth. Buoyancy aids are also available and there will always be a physiotherapist in the pool and an assistant on the side of the pool. Even if you are worried about water, you should try hydrotherapy (if suggested by your physiotherapist) as almost all patients find the warm water very soothing and enjoyable.

What happens at the end of a course of hydrotherapy?

Exercise helps almost all forms of arthritis, so after your course of hydrotherapy you will probably be advised to continue your exercises in your local swimming pool. It is worth investigating your local facilities as some pools have special sessions where the water temperature is increased. Some sports centres may have general exercise groups in water, but you should speak to your physiotherapist or doctor before joining these.

Gentle swimming can also help, but again speak to a health professional first.

What are the side-effects of hydrotherapy?

Hydrotherapy is one of the safest treatments for arthritis and back pain. The warmth of the water and the exercise may make you feel tired after treatment. This is normal.

When is hydrotherapy not appropriate?

With certain medical conditions hydrotherapy may not be suitable. These include:

- wound or skin infections
- viruses/stomach upset
- a raised temperature
- angina/heart problems
- incontinence
- chest infections.

Exercise or rest

You must find the right balance between exercise and rest. Careful attention to rest, exercise and the way you hold your joints is an important part of pain management. Rest is often needed to settle an inflamed joint or in a general flare-up but too much rest will weaken muscles and increase stiffness.

Use the following principles as a guide:

- When your joints are inflamed, you need to rest. The amount and type of rest will depend on how inflamed your joints are.
- If joints ache only on certain movements, have a rest from those movements.
- Joints that are stiff need more exercise.
- Joints that are weak and unstable require more support.
- Rest does not always mean lying down. It can also mean changing your posture, wearing your splint or doing a different activity.

Just as exercise and rest are important, so is relaxation. Relaxation will enhance your rest periods and decrease stress levels. Relaxation includes slow, deep breathing and meditation.

For further information and details of local arthritis management and support programs contact your State/Territory Arthritis Office on 1800 011 041