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Benefits of Exercise for Osteoarthritis

Physical activity is the best non-drug treatment for improving pain and function in OA.

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While you may worry that exercising with osteoarthritis could harm your joints and cause more pain, research shows that people can and should exercise when they have osteoarthritis. In fact, exercise is considered the most effective non-drug treatment for reducing pain and improving movement in patients with osteoarthritis.

What Exercises Work Best for Osteoarthritis?

Each of the following types of exercises plays a role in maintaining and improving the ability to move and function:

Range of motion or flexibility exercises. Range of motion refers to the ability to move your joints through the full motion they were designed to achieve. These exercises include gentle stretching and movements that take joints through their full span. Doing these exercises regularly can help maintain and improve the flexibility in the joints.

Aerobic/endurance exercise. These exercises strengthen the heart and make the lungs more efficient. This conditioning also reduces fatigue and builds stamina. Aerobic exercise also helps control weight by increasing the amount of calories the body uses. Aerobic exercises include walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming or using the elliptical machine.

Strengthening exercises. These exercises help maintain and improve muscle strength. Strong muscles can support and protect joints that are affected by arthritis.

Two types of exercise are particularly good for most people with osteoarthritis.

Walking. It is (usually) free, it is easy on the joints and it comes with a host of benefits. One major plus is that it improves circulation – and wards off heart disease, lowers blood pressure and, as an aerobic exercise, strengthens the heart. It also lowers the risk of fractures (by stopping or slowing down the loss of bone mass) and tones muscles that support joints.

Aquatic (water) exercises. These are particularly helpful for people just beginning to exercise as well as those who are overweight. Aquatic exercises do not involve swimming, rather they are performed while standing in about shoulder-height water. The water helps relieve the pressure of your body's weight on the affected joints (hips and knees in particular), while providing resistance for your muscles to get stronger. Regular aquatic exercise can help relieve pain and improve daily function in people with hip and knee OA.

How Much Exercise Is Good for Osteoarthritis?

Always follow the advice from your doctor or physical therapist. In general, range-of-motion exercises should be done every day.

The weekly recommendation for aerobic exercise is *150 minutes of moderate-intensity* OR *75 minutes of vigorous-intensity* OR an equivalent combination. This translates into taking a 30-minute swift walk or bike ride five times per week OR

jogging, swimming, or biking that gets your heart pumping for 25 minutes three times per week OR any combination of these based on your ability and preference.

“Exercise is good. But exercise intelligently,” says Bashir Zikria, MD, an assistant professor of sports medicine at Johns Hopkins University Medical Center in Baltimore. “Low-impact exercises, like walking, cycling or using an elliptical

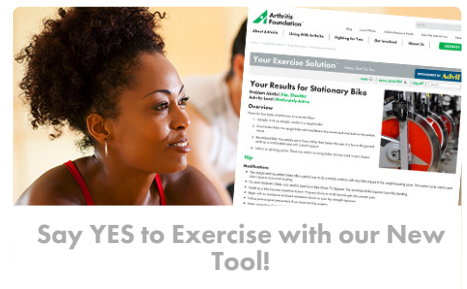
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machine are smart choices," says Dr. Zikria. "If you run, play basketball or do other high-impact activities, avoid hard surfaces and don't do it every day."

Bottom Line

Multiple studies show that mild to moderate exercise is beneficial for people with arthritis. However, everyone's circumstances are different, so having a discussion about exercise with your doctor is important. Together with your doctor and/or physical therapist you can design an exercise plan that is best for you.

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