

Benefits of exercise for arthritis sufferers

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An estimated 50 million adults in the United States suffer from arthritis. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one of the best ways to combat the onset of arthritis, control pain and improve function is through exercise.

“People who have arthritis are often scared to [exercise](#) because they think they will hurt themselves, but the condition will only get worse if people don’t get moving,” said Valerie Walkowiak, medical integration coordinator at the Loyola Center for Fitness. “The best way to start is to talk to your doctor about exercising and then work with a therapist or personal trainer to establish guidelines. Be proactive and take it one step at a time.”

Some of the benefits of exercise for arthritis sufferers include:

- Preserving and restoring range of motion and flexibility around each affected joint
- Increasing muscle strength and endurance to enhance joint stability
- Increasing aerobic conditioning to improve psychological state and decrease risks of disease

According to Walkowiak, the best exercise routine will depend on what type of arthritis has been diagnosed.

The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis, when cartilage

begins to break down leaving the joint with no cushion between bones. Rheumatoid arthritis, in which inflammation in the joint causes it to lose shape and alignment, also affects many Americans. Though the specifics will depend on each individual, all exercise programs should include stretching, muscle strengthening and low-impact aerobic exercise.

“For all arthritis sufferers, the most beneficial exercise will be stretching to increase range of motion around an affected joint,” Walkowiak said. “The type of stretching one should do depends on which joint is affected.”

Muscle-strength training also is important for improving daily function. Be careful when starting a weight-training routine. Use light resistance with minimal repetitions. Lift weights 2-3 times a week with a day of rest between to allow for muscle recovery. One should not experience pain when performing exercises.

“Arthritis affects people in all age groups and fitness levels. The activities that an individual will be able to perform will depend on their current fitness level,” Walkowiak said.

Low-impact aerobic exercise is safe for people with arthritis and helps with pain control and to improve daily function.

“Start slow with 10 to 15 minutes of aerobic exercise every other day to see how it impacts your body. As your body adapts to the new routine, gradually increase duration to 30 to 45 minutes,” Walkowiak said.

Some low-impact exercise ideas include:

- Aquatic exercise
- Walking

- Stationary bikes
- Gardening (depending on affected joint)
- Lap swimming
- Yoga
- Tai-Chi
- Low-impact aerobic classes

Walkowiak suggests that you always listen to your body and not push yourself too far, which can lead to injury. Here are a few more tips to keep in mind when starting an exercise routine:

- Get professional advice and set guidelines before starting a program
- Listen to your body. Pain is not a part of being fit
- Don't exercise during an [arthritis](#) flare-up
- Start slow and progress as you go
- Always warm up properly before you begin, including stretching and walking for a few minutes

“If we don't keep our bodies healthy and active, we can lose function as we age. We all want to be independent and able to care for ourselves and by being proactive now we can make that a reality for a long time,” Walkowiak said.

Provided by Loyola Medicine Health System

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