KEEP MOVING

How a few simple exercises can make you feel better about yourself and your arthritis

Arthritis Research Campaign
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Introduction
Most of us get aches and pains at some time in our lives. Many of us know exercise can help but aren't sure what to do about it. This booklet is aimed at people with arthritis who want to know more about how they can exercise safely. It explains why exercise is helpful and important, what types of exercise you can do, and gives some examples to do at home.

Experts now recognise the importance of keeping arthritic joints supple by staying as mobile and as active as possible because it will reduce pain, and can have psychological benefits by improving patients' self-confidence and esteem. The challenge now is to get this message across to all healthcare professionals, as well as to the public, and to patients themselves.

Many people, particularly older people, are afraid to exercise because they believe -- wrongly -- that it will cause further damage to their joints. But joints are designed to move, and inactivity is detrimental to all tissues in and around the joint. So to prolong the life of a joint, patients should remain active. Just sitting around in a chair is the worst thing someone with arthritis can do.

Motivation is another key issue. Often people start a new type of exercise with enthusiasm, only to lapse after a few weeks. Joining some sort of exercise class may be the most appropriate way for some, whereas others will be happier getting fitter in the comfort of their own home. There is no need to spend a lot of money on expensive equipment -- other than to invest in a good pair of trainers. The important thing is to set realistic goals, and do some form of exercise that you enjoy, and then do it regularly.

What is arthritis?
You may have arthritis yourself or know someone who does. Arthritis is simply a term meaning inflammation of the joint or joints, but is often used to include all joint disorders. Sometimes joints are damaged through the disease process of arthritis. Plenty of people have other forms of rheumatic disease other than arthritis, but still need to exercise.

Why do I get aches and pains?
Our bodies need to be used and moved. If for some reason we stay still in one position for long we get uncomfortable and our muscles will start to ache and joints get stiff. Most of us don't get enough exercise in our daily lives and so we develop aches. If you have arthritis as well and are in some discomfort, the body's natural reaction is to not want to move. But this causes even more stiffness, and in the long term our muscles get weak and aren't able to hold us in the right position. We then start to slouch and end up with more aches and pains.
Physical and psychological

Why is exercise important?
Exercise has multiple purposes. It can help ease stiffness, improve movement in our joints, and strengthen muscles, as well as help us get fitter in general, which is important for keeping our hearts healthy. Many of us are too heavy and this puts an extra stress on our joints and can lead to injuries. Exercising can be a really effective way to help lose weight as well as reduce any joint pains.

The type of exercise you do depends on what problems you may have, but everyone can benefit from some form of exercise. Have you ever noticed how much better and stronger you feel in yourself when you’ve done some exercise?

What sort of exercise is important?

- Exercise need not involve equipment, and often the simplest exercises are the best.
- Stretching exercises help ease aches and pain as well as getting best movement from our joints.
- Strengthening exercises are important because we rely on our muscles to support our joints and keep them in the right position when we move. If muscles are weak, joints can become unstable, and this can be painful.
- Fitness exercises, which can be as simple as walking a bit further or faster than you normally would, are also very important.

Stretching exercises.

Stretching exercises (also known as range of movement exercises) are often very simple, and most of us already do some without even realising it: stretching the arms in the morning on waking, for example.

Most of us never take our joints through their full range of movement during the day even though we might think we are fairly active. Because of this, in time, the structures around the joints (like ligaments and tendons) can all get tight and this can be uncomfortable and lead to more pain.

The exercises shown over the page for your neck, shoulders, wrist and hands, hips, knees, ankles and back are designed to make sure your joints are taken as far as they safely and comfortably can. By doing them you will be stretching the ligaments and tendons and keeping your joints moving more efficiently. You should move as far as you can until you feel a stretch in the muscles around the joints. You should never “bounce” a joint when doing these exercises but hold the stretch for about five to ten seconds, then relax and repeat the movement ten times.

Some aspects of exercises taught in yoga can be good for people with arthritis. If you’re not sure, discuss them with your physiotherapist.
Strengthening exercises.

When we are in pain, our natural reaction is not to want to move. The problem with this is that not only do our joints very quickly get stiff and more painful, but after only a short time, our muscles start to weaken and get smaller.

You have probably noticed how weak and wobbly you feel after just a few days in bed with flu. So imagine what can happen if we don't move our joints properly for a few weeks. We are left not being able to do what we previously could, not just because of pain in the joints but also because of weakness in the muscles around them.

For this reason, for most people with arthritis it is a good idea to build some strengthening exercises into your exercise programme. If the joints are especially hot or swollen it is probably advisable to leave out the strengthening exercises until they settle down again, but you can still do the stretching exercises, but do them gently and only do five repetitions once in a day.

To strengthen muscles we usually need to move them against some resistance. An example for the arms might be pushing against the wall or using a weight in your hand such as a potato or bag of sugar and moving your arm in front of you or out to the sides.

Alternatively, even standing up from a chair because you are pushing up against gravity will mean you are strengthening your leg muscles. (See picture overleaf)

If all else fails and you haven't got a wall, potato or chair you can use your other leg for resistance. (See picture overleaf)

All these exercises should be done slowly. Start doing about five and build up the number gradually. If you find you have more pain either in your muscles or in the joints, stop. It is normal to get some muscle soreness after exercise, especially if you’re not used to exercising. If you are back to normal by the next day, then start again, but do half the number you did the previous day and then if all is well gradually increase the number each day.

You may also want to try pilates, a type of exercise which focuses on strengthening the muscles that are involved in improving posture, and keeping the joints in the correct position. This is very safe for people with arthritis, particularly inflammatory conditions.
Useful websites

Arthritis Foundation www.arthritis.org
Arthritis Research Campaign www.arc.org.uk
Arthritis Society (Canada) www.arthritis.ca
BackCare www.backpain.org
BBC Health Page www.bbc.co.uk/health
Body Control Pilates www.bodycontrol.co.uk
Chartered Society of Physiotherapy www.csp.org.uk
National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society www.nass.co.uk
National Electronic Library for Health www.nelh-pc.nhs.uk
National Osteoporosis Society www.nos.org.uk
NHS Direct www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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Further reading

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Useful addresses

Arthritis Care
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London NW1 2HD
Tel: 0207 380 6500
(main switchboard)

Arthritis Research Campaign
St Mary's Gate
Chesterfield
Derbyshire S41 7TD
Tel: 01246 558033

BackCare
16 Elmtree Road
Teddington TW11 8ST
Tel: 0208 977 5474

The Fitness League
52 London Street
Chertsey
Surrey KT16 8AJ
Tel: 01932 564567

Body Control Pilates Association
14 Neal's Yard
Covent Garden
London WC2H 9DP
Tel: 0207 379 3734

National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society
PO Box 179
Mayfield
East Sussex TN20 6ZL
Tel: 01435 873527

National Osteoporosis Society (NOS)
PO Box 10
Radstock
Bath BA3 3YB
Tel: 01761 471771

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Cost: £5.99

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Cost: £5.99

Publisher: Thorsons
Cost: £8.99

Publisher: Arthritis Care
Cost: £1.50