Keep moving

This booklet provides information and answers to your questions about how to exercise if you have arthritis.

Arthritis Research UK produce and print our booklets entirely from charitable donations.
This booklet is for people with arthritis who want to know more about how they can exercise safely. We’ll explain why exercise is helpful and important, and what types of exercise you can do. The handy poster shows you some examples of exercises to do at home.

At the back of this booklet you’ll find a brief glossary of medical words – we’ve underlined these when they’re first used.
What’s inside?

3 Introduction
3 What is arthritis?
3 Why do I get aches and pains?
4 Why is exercise important?
4 What sort of exercise is important?
5 Stretching exercises
5 Strengthening exercises
6 General fitness exercises
   – Swimming
   – Walking
   – Fitness classes
   – Cycling
   – Gym
9 What else should I know?
12 Progress chart
14 Glossary
14 Where can I find out more?
16 We’re here to help
Regular exercise is very important if you have arthritis as it can reduce pain and keep you healthy and independent.

Find a form of exercise you enjoy – and keep at it!
Introduction

Keeping arthritic joints supple by staying as mobile and as active as possible is important because it can reduce your pain, help you to stay independent and improve your self-confidence.

Many people are afraid to exercise because they believe – mistakenly – that it’ll cause further damage to their joints. But your body is designed to move, and not doing so is harmful to the tissues in and around the joints. So to increase the life of your joints, you should stay active.

Motivation is a key issue. Often we start a new type of exercise with enthusiasm, only to give up after a few weeks. The important thing is to set realistic goals, to do some form of exercise that you enjoy and to do it regularly. You may find that your goals change as your condition changes, and this is perfectly normal.

Joining a gym or buying fitness equipment can be expensive, but remember there are lots of effective exercises you can do for free in your own home.

If you go to a gym or health club, tell the fitness instructor about your condition so that they can draw up an appropriate exercise plan. Your physiotherapist can advise you about this too, and may provide you with a personal exercise plan to follow.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a term meaning inflammation of a joint, or maybe several joints, but it’s often used to include all joint disorders. Often arthritis can lead to changes in the structure of joints.

The most common forms of arthritis in the UK are rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Whatever type of arthritis or rheumatic condition you may have, it’s very important that you make regular exercise part of your life.

See Arthritis Research UK booklets

Osteoarthritis; Rheumatoid arthritis; What is arthritis?

It should still be possible to exercise even when you have a flare-up of arthritis. Find out which joints you can still move safely and exercise those.

Why do I get aches and pains?

Your body needs to be used and moved. If you stay still in one position for too long, you’ll get uncomfortable, your muscles will start to ache and your joints will 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, your body’s natural reaction is to not want to move. But this causes even more stiffness, and in the long term your muscles get weak and won’t be able to hold you in the right position. You may then start to slouch and end up with more aches and pains.
Why is exercise important?
Exercise has many benefits. It can help to ease stiffness, improve movement in your joints and strengthen muscles, as well as helping you to get fitter in general, which is important for keeping your heart healthy.

⚠️ If you’re overweight, your joints will be under extra strain. Exercise can help you lose weight and ease some of this pain.

Everyone can benefit from some form of exercise, regardless of their condition. Often you’ll feel much better and more self-confident when you’ve done some exercise. Feeling positive can really affect the way you cope with a condition.

What sort of exercise is important?
Exercise doesn’t need to involve equipment, and often the simplest exercises are the best.

- **Stretching exercises** help ease aches and pains and get the best movement from your 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 very important to keep your heart healthy. You might like to join a sports team or a leisure centre so you can exercise with other people. Some people find that doing exercise in a group gives them extra motivation to keep going, and it can be a good way to meet people with the same interests.

**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 your arms in the morning when you wake, for example.

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

The exercises shown on the poster provided are designed to make sure your joints are stretched as far as they safely and comfortably can be. By doing them you’ll be stretching the ligaments and tendons and keeping your joints moving. 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. Instead, hold the stretch for about 5–10 seconds, then relax and repeat the movement 5–10 times if you’re able. You can track your progress using the chart towards the end of the booklet.

⚠️ 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**

Your natural reaction when you’re in pain is to not want to move. The problem with this is that your joints very quickly get stiff and more painful, and after only a short time your muscles start to weaken. A bout of flu can leave you weak and wobbly after just a few days in bed, so imagine what can happen if you don’t move your joints properly for a few weeks, months or even years. You’re left not being able to do what you previously could, not just because of pain in your joints but also because of weakness in the muscles around them. This is why it’s a good idea to build some strengthening exercises into your exercise programme if you have arthritis.

If your joints are especially hot or swollen, it’s probably a good idea to leave out the strengthening exercises until they settle down again (you can still do the stretching exercises, but do them gently and only do a few repetitions once a day).
To strengthen muscles we usually need to move them against some resistance. Even standing up from a chair will mean you’re strengthening your leg muscles because you’re working against gravity.

All strengthening exercises should be done slowly. Start with a low number of repetitions and build up the number gradually. It’s normal to get some muscle soreness after exercise, especially if you’re not used to exercising, but you should stop if you find you have more pain either in your muscles or in the joints.

If you’re back to normal by the next day, carry on slowly. Then, if all is well, gradually increase the amount each day. Use the chart near the end of the booklet to keep track of your progress.

You may want to try Pilates, a type of exercise that focuses on strengthening the muscles involved in improving posture and keeping the joints in the correct position. Discuss which classes would be best for you with your physiotherapist.

General fitness exercises
Exercise is important for everybody. We should all do a mix of moderate- and high-intensity exercise for at least 30 minutes three times a week. Here are some general ways to stay fit and healthy, no matter what your condition.

Swimming
Swimming is an excellent all-round form of exercise for people with arthritis because the joints are supported in the water, which makes it easier to move them. It’s important for people with osteoporosis to do some form of weight-bearing exercise as well as swimming, to help maintain bone density.

You can also strengthen muscles by moving your limbs firmly against the resistance of the water, which will also exercise your heart and lungs. If you have neck problems you may find that breaststroke makes your condition worse rather than improves it, but this could simply be down to not doing it correctly. Remember, it’s never too late to go to a swimming class.

Hydrotherapy is a set of exercises done in warm water under the supervision of a physiotherapist. It’s a safe and effective treatment for arthritis and back pain.

Some sports centres also offer aquarobic exercise sessions, which give a good overall workout without putting too much stress on your joints. Check with your doctor first and go at your own pace if you feel the exercises are too fast for you.
Walking

Walking is a simple, cheap and very effective way to exercise. Putting weight through your legs when you walk helps keep your bones as strong as possible and reduces the risk of getting osteoporosis.

You need to start gently and gradually increase the amount you do each time. Start by walking a few houses away and back. Time yourself and then try to improve on the time each day, or gradually increase the distance or walk uphill more often. Go to post a letter on foot, then go to the local shop. Work out what’s best for you – and keep at it!

Fitness classes

Low-impact forms of aerobics are better for people with arthritis than high-impact forms but other suitable classes include general keep-fit (some of which are aimed at older people) and t’ai chi. Aerobic and step-aerobic classes can be an excellent way to get fit, but if you have joint pains some of the exercises may make these pains worse. Yoga has also been shown to help some people with arthritis. Get advice from your physiotherapist before you start.

Cycling

Cycling is particularly good for strengthening your knees and for general fitness. You can use a static exercise bike at home or in a gym, or there are many traffic-free cycle paths if you want to go outside. If you get a lot of knee pain you may have to take it very gently to start off with, and stop if your pain gets worse after cycling.

Gym

You may find it useful to join a gym and use different pieces of equipment to strengthen muscles and get fitter in general. However, using weights can increase pain if the weights are too heavy.
As a general rule it’s far better to use very low weights but do lots of slow, controlled repetitions. That way you’ll safely strengthen the muscles which support the joints. It can be useful to discuss your exercise programme with the gym instructors or your physiotherapist.

Many people think that jogging is a good way to get fit. It may be for some, but if you have joint pains it probably isn’t the best way for you. This is because jogging can jar your joints and make the pain worse.

What else should I know?

Footwear
What you wear on your feet is important. Usually trainers are the best for exercising. Footwear needs to be well fitting, so your foot is held firmly in the shoe and doesn’t slide around. Wider fitting shoes will make sure that your toes aren’t squashed. A soft, well-cushioned sole is also important to absorb shocks and protect your joints while you’re exercising. Your doctor may refer you to a podiatrist or an orthotist, who can both provide you with expert advice on specialist footwear and insoles.

How much exercise should I do and how often?
Generally, the approach of little and often is the right one. If you already have some joint pains, doing 5–10 minutes of exercise each day is important for you to keep your joints moving and your muscles strong. Try to do this a couple of times a day and build it into your normal daily routine.

Build exercises into your daily routine by doing them after a certain task. For example, every time you wash your hands, take a few minutes to do some simple exercises. It may sound silly, but it’ll help you remember!

Exercising to your favourite music can help keep you motivated.