

## Exercise and Arthritis

There was a time when people with arthritis were warned that exercise would damage their joints. Now we know that physical activity is one of the best nondrug therapies for arthritis pain.

In fact, exercising even a little bit every day delivers many benefits, including:

- Keeping joints flexible and easing stiffness.
- Strengthening the muscles around joints to keep them stable.
- Slowing deterioration of bone and cartilage.
- Improving bone strength.
- Maintaining the ability to do daily activities.

Being physically active can also help improve your mood, increase energy, promote good sleep, aid weight loss and strengthen your heart.

## Types of Exercise

When you think of exercise, you may first think of running or biking. But people with arthritis benefit from a balanced exercise program that includes the following:

- **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 bending movements. Doing these exercises regularly can help maintain and improve joint flexibility.
- **Aerobic/endurance exercises.** 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



## EXERCISE RECOMMENDATION

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends weekly aerobic exercise of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity OR 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity OR an equivalent combination.

This means you can take a 30-minute swift walk or bike ride five times per week OR you can jog, swim or bike, getting your heart pumping for 25 minutes three times per week OR any combination of these based on your ability and preference.

the number 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. This includes the use of hand weights, weight machines, resistance bands and household items like soup cans.

You should aim to do range-of-motion and aerobic exercises daily and strengthening exercises every other day. Walking, biking, yoga, tai chi and water-based exercises are all good choices for arthritis.



## For More Information

**Exercises for Arthritis**  
[arthritis.org/exercise](https://www.arthritis.org/exercise)

**Walk With Ease**  
[arthritis.org/WWE](https://www.arthritis.org/WWE)

**Arthritis Foundation Helpline**  
[1-800-283-7800](tel:1-800-283-7800) | [helpline@arthritis.org](mailto:helpline@arthritis.org)

### Getting Started With an Exercise Program

Before you start an exercise program, it's important to check with your rheumatologist and/or general practitioner and let them know that you're going to start exercising. They may advise against specific activities because of your medical history or joint involvement.

Once you're ready to begin a new exercise routine, it is best to start small. Thirty minutes of exercise still counts if you break it into three 10-minute increments throughout a day.

You may need to try exercising at different times of the day to see what works best for you. There may be a time of the day when you're feeling less pain and stiffness and you have enough time to focus on your routine. Try range-of-motion exercises before bed to help you feel less stiff in the morning. Avoid doing aerobic exercise too close to bedtime because it could make it difficult to fall asleep.

During the first few weeks of your new exercise program, you may notice that your heart beats faster and you breathe faster. That's because your heart and lungs are being pushed in new ways. Your muscles may feel tight, and you may feel tired at night but wake up feeling refreshed in the morning.



### IMPORTANCE OF WARM-UP AND COOL-DOWN EXERCISES

No matter what exercise you're doing, be sure to take five to 15 minutes to warm up before you begin your routine and cool down afterwards to reduce your chance of injury. Follow these steps before and after your workout:

- Walk slowly for a few minutes or do a slow version of the activity you plan to do (e.g., slow squats or jog in place).
- Do gentle stretches, moving toward your full range of motion. When cooling down, hold those stretches for five seconds and relax.
- Be sure to stretch all the muscles you use during your exercise routine.
- Move only until you feel a gentle stretch; don't push so hard it hurts.

### FAQ

**How do I know if the pain I feel while exercising is normal?** Pain typically is your warning signal that something is wrong. Mild muscle soreness after a workout is normal. But if pain persists, it may mean that you are doing the move incorrectly or putting too much stress on your joints. Stop exercising and contact your doctor immediately if you experience sharp pain (or worse pain than usual), feel tightness in your chest, are severely short of breath, or feel dizzy, faint or sick to your stomach.

**It's been so long since I've exercised. What if I can't do it?** It's normal to feel hesitant about something you haven't done in a while. Try not to think of exercise as a competition. Instead,

focus on your own abilities and do what you can. Celebrate each accomplishment, no matter how small, to help reinforce your confidence and keep you going.

**I used to do a lot of high-impact sports. Now that I have arthritis, are my sports days over?** If you are used to more high-energy, high-impact exercise, having arthritis doesn't have to mean those activities are off limits for you. If your disease is well managed, you don't have to stay in the slow lane. However, you should choose a sport or activity that doesn't put a lot of stress on joints that have significant damage. Talk to your doctor about what activities are appropriate for you.