

**Moving for Health Lesson Series**  
**Active Aging**

## Active with Arthritis

Although arthritis affects all ages, it is a factor that can relate to physical activity in older adults. There are over 100 forms of arthritis, but these recommendations will focus on the most common form, osteoarthritis. In this type, the cartilage covering the ends of bones in the joints decreases. As bone begins to rub against bone, pain and reduced movement can result.

The pain of arthritis might keep you from doing physical activities. This lack of movement can add to stiff joints and reduce the ability to move comfortably. Regular movement through physical activity can keep the joints more flexible, and strengthening the muscles helps them to support and protect the joints. The addition of physical activity to the treatment plan you are receiving from your doctor can help with everyday activities. It may help to prevent joint damage.

The type of physical activity that is right for you depends on the type of arthritis you have and the severity of your condition. It is very important to seek the guidance of a physician and physical therapist to develop a program that is right for you. The main risk of physical activity is usually the chance of aggravating your arthritis by exercising too long or too hard. This is why it is very important to start slowly and follow a program designed just for you.

A balanced program suggested for the general adult population applies to those with arthritis. This includes:

- Flexibility or range-of-motion training - stretching
- Resistance training – weights or exercise tubes
- Endurance training – walking, biking, dancing



As a beginner, if pain, stiffness, and weakness, are a problem you may want to begin only with flexibility and resistance training. Endurance training can be added as it becomes easier to do the other two types of activity. To gradually include endurance activities such as walking or biking, begin by adding 5 minutes 3 times a day for a total of 15 minutes. Time should gradually be added to reach a goal of 30 minutes a day most days of the week.

Arthritis can affect the joints in different ways. Pain in the leg joints might prevent walking as a form of endurance activity. Water aerobics is a popular form of endurance activity for arthritis patients, although, access to a pool year round might be a problem. If there is one available, this type of activity can be of great value to someone with arthritis. Here's why:

- Warm water can raise body temperature and increase circulation.
- Water provides a gentle environment for exercising the joints and muscles versus the stress of the feet pounding on pavement.
- The water supports the body weight, putting less stress on the joints during movement.

- Water can act as a form of resistance to strengthen muscle and provide a gentle increase in intensity.



Below are some general guidelines for doing physical activity with arthritis.

- Reduce pain and swelling by applying treatment to the areas that will be involved in the activity.
  - Soothing, comfortable heat for 20 minutes.
  - Cold for 10-to-15 minutes at a time.
- Include a 10 to 15 minute warm-up.
- Wear comfortable clothing and shoes designed for physical activity that have shock absorbent soles to reduce the stress on joints.
- Stop if you feel any pain during your activity. Gently rub and stretch muscle pains or cramps until pain is gone.
- Cool down and gently stretch for at least 10 minutes after activity.

#### Sources

- Arthritis Foundation. *The Facts About Arthritis, Exercise and Your Arthritis, Water Exercise*. All available online at [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org).

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