

Living a full, active life with arthritis

Many people experience the aches and pains of arthritis, especially as they age. In fact, arthritis is the most common chronic condition in people over age 65 in North America. While once thought of as a death sentence for an active lifestyle, we now know that maintaining and even progressing physical activity can help with arthritis symptoms.



Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common form of arthritis and results from degeneration of the cartilage that cushions joint surfaces. In other words, the smooth lining that helps bones roll and glide on each other with ease wears down, causing stiffness, pain, swelling, and decreased blood flow to that area.

Where there was once cushion to absorb shock and reduce friction with activities like jumping, bending, squatting and loading, now there is more friction on contact of bone on bone.

This causes dull, achy, nagging pain at one or multiple joints. Usually people who experience OA have the worst pain in the morning, and it gradually improves throughout the day. However, if swelling is present, it may increase as a person uses the joint more during the day. For instance, if the knee is swollen, the swelling may be worse after walking or prolonged standing.

The most common joints affected by OA are the hips, knees, hands and feet. It's also frequently seen in the shoulders, spine, and ankles. A variety of risk factors contribute to developing OA, both modifiable and non-modifiable.

See below for a list of each.

Risk Factors for Osteoarthritis

Modifiable

- Obesity
- Repeated stress on joints
- Body mass index
- Physical activity level

Non-Modifiable

- Age
- Gender (more common in women)
- Genetics

- Bone deformities

How does exercise help? Here's the breakdown. Arthritis causes pain and stiffness in joints. When it hurts to move a joint, people typically avoid moving it, making it stiffer. Stiff joints don't get good circulation (blood flow). Circulation helps tissues heal. So, when there's decreased blood flow to a joint, tissue healing decreases, and the joint becomes stiffer because it's not being moved. Stiff joints also tend to lose range of motion.

Once a few degrees of range is lost when straightening the knee for example, it will change the way you walk and thereby change the way your hip is working as well. As you can see, this becomes a dangerous cycle. Luckily, exercise stimulates circulation to a joint, improving mobility, quality of movement, and tissue healing. Your physiotherapist will help guide you as to what exercises are safe to do and how often to do them so you can stay active and healthy.

Physiotherapy is the first step in managing arthritis, as exercise given in the proper dosage can alleviate symptoms and improve overall quality of life. Your physiotherapist may use exercises to improve your range of motion, strength, flexibility, and balance. They may also perform manual therapy, such as soft tissue and joint mobilization, to improve circulation and quality of movement in a particular area. These tools will help reduce your symptoms and restore your ability to do things like swim, lift weights, or walk.

If you find that physiotherapy is only partially managing your symptoms, your doctor may suggest you take medication such as Acetaminophen, a Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory (NSAID), or glucosamine chondroitin. Arthritis doesn't have to stop you from living an active lifestyle. Contact Advantage Physiotherapy today to find out more.

References

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