

Orthopaedic Connection

Exercise and Arthritis: Are They Compatible?

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

As an Orthopaedic Surgeon I am asked questions about arthritis and exercise on a daily basis.

The goal of exercise in patients with arthritis is to strengthen the muscles of the body around joints and to increase the flexibility of the joints. Sounds pretty logical and straightforward doesn't it?

But wait, can you make arthritis worse by doing exercises?

There are a lot of conflicting studies and information out there, which I will try to demystify for you.

Key Points

- Pain during the activity is a red flag to stop what you are doing.
- Pain that develops after exercise means you can get back to doing it less intensively, with fewer reps or for a shorter period.

Remember, an arthritic joint is not as strong or stable as a healthy one.

Important Variable

The effect of exercise on an arthritic joint is dependent on

- what kind of shape you are in
- How much you weigh

These two variables are probably equal in importance to the type of exercise.

Dangerous Activities

- Leg strengthening activities that require tightening of the thigh muscles and leg curls for hamstrings have to be done in a pain free arc. Pain = you are doing more damage.
- Running
- Jogging
- Aerobic exercise on a hard floor
- Downhill skiing
- Singles tennis

Arthritis Friendly Activities

Having knee arthritis is not a reason to discontinue resistance exercise, range of motion exercise or all sports.

In arthritis the saying "no pain, no gain" does not apply. It is possible to work within a comfortable range and still make progressive gains in strength.

- The key term is low impact
- Swimming
- Walking
- Cycling
- Cross country skiing
- Dancing
- Bowling
- Tai Chi
- Yoga
- Golf

All are OK if they do not aggravate symptoms.

Guidelines

- Warm up before beginning any activity
- Start slowly and increase intensity and duration gradually
- Avoid rapid movements. Slow and moderate speeds are best.
- Walking is safer than jogging
- In water, resistance is 50% of dry land
- Swimming and cycling are better than jogging
- 48 hours between the same activity
- Different activities can be done on alternate days

The Message

A program of exercise and physical activity is even more important now than it was before you had arthritis! Arthritis will not get better without your intervention. It doesn't have to ruin your life.

You must find activities that are safe and that you enjoy because the arthritis is going to last as long as you do!

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website.

I sincerely appreciate all of you loyal readers and patients present and future and welcome all newcomers!

Besides what you read today there is a huge treasure trove of Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal information at www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It contains the Website Library, Your Orthopaedic Connection and complete archive of every GCH article I have written.

I specialize in you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush