

Managing Arthritis Pain



Almost all of us know somebody with osteoarthritis (OA)—a problem that affects 21 million Americans. The condition, which is the most common type of arthritis, strikes at bone cartilage so that joints rub painfully against each other.

If you have OA, you probably can't perform simple, daily activities without pain. In fact, pain, stiffness, fatigue and fear of doing more harm can make you afraid of any physical activity.

But inactivity may increase your symptom because you become weaker and less flexible. Therefore, you should participate in safe, appropriate exercise programs to maintain strength, endurance and flexibility.

The following three types of exercise can reduce arthritis-related disability and pain.

Flexibility or stretching. Gentle, low-intensity exercises performed daily to maintain or improve range of motion are the foundations of most therapeutic exercise programs. Adequate flexibility improves function and reduces the chances for injury.

Muscle conditioning (strength and endurance). These activities are more vigorous than flexibility exercises and are usually performed every other day. They're designed to make muscles work harder than usual. This extra workload may be achieved from lifting the

weight of your arm, leg or trunk against gravity, or using weights, elastic bands or weight machines for more resistance. Muscles adapt to the new demands by getting stronger and become capable of working longer.

Cardiorespiratory conditioning. These activities use large body muscles in rhythmic and repetitive movements. They can improve heart, lung and muscle function, as well as improve weight control, mood and general health. These aerobic exercises include swimming, aerobic dance or aquatics, biking, or exercising on equipment, such as treadmills or rowing machines. Daily activities—mowing the lawn, raking leaves, sweeping driveways, playing golf or walking the dog—are aerobic exercises.

The most effective and safest intensity for aerobic exercise is moderate exertion. This means the exerciser can speak normally, doesn't get out of breath or over-heated and can carry on activities at a comfortable pace.

Thirty minutes is the current recommendation for regular aerobic activity on most days of the week. These 30 minutes can be accumulated in three, 10-minute periods of activity over the course of the day for the same health benefits as one continuous 30-minute session.

Along with exercising, you can manage

arthritis by building your life around wellness, not pain or sickness. To that end, your mind plays an important role in how you feel pain and respond to illness. If you think of pain as a signal to take positive action rather than an ordeal you have to endure, you can learn to manage it. Some suggestions include:

Relaxation. When people are in pain and experience stress, muscles tighten, breathing becomes fast and shallow, and the heart rate and blood pressure go up. Relaxation can help you reverse these effects and give you a sense of control and well being, making it easier for you to manage pain. Relaxation involves learning ways to be calm and in control. Methods that can help you do so include yoga, meditation, Tai Chi, and relaxation video and audio tapes.

Massage. Massage warms and relaxes painful areas. You can massage your own muscles or ask your doctor to recommend a massage therapist.

When doing self-massage, stop if you feel any pain. If you have a professional massage, make sure the massage therapist has experience working with people who have arthritis.

Other ways to manage arthritis include thinking positive thoughts, having a sense of humor, eating a balanced diet and enjoying activities with friends and family.

While a comprehensive exercise program for people with arthritis includes these components, the content and progression of a program depends on individual needs and capabilities. If you have a long-standing, severe disease or multiple-joint involvement, be sure to talk to your health care team.

The most successful exercise programs begin with the knowledge and support of people who are experienced with arthritis and exercise. In addition, enlist their support to learn about pain management techniques. ■

Information adapted from the American College of Rheumatology via www.rheumatology.org/patients/factsheet/exercise.html and the Arthritis Foundation via www.arthritis.org/answers/tips_managepain.asp