



Exercise can improve symptoms of arthritis



Have you ever experienced pain or stiffness in your fingers? How about in your knees, back, or hips? Have you ever heard a crunching noise that sounds like two bones rubbing together?

These are the most common symptoms of arthritis. The term arthritis refers to pain, stiffness or swelling in a joint (like your fingers, knees, or hips). Those who suffer from severe arthritis experience difficulty

performing daily activities like going to work, walking, dressing, and bathing.

Common forms of arthritis (such as osteoarthritis) are a normal part of aging but some forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, result from problems with the immune system (which protects your body from diseases). Although arthritis is painful, exercise can improve many of the symptoms.

Osteoarthritis (OA)

• *What is it?*

Osteoarthritis is a joint disease that affects the cushion between your bones. As we age, the slippery tissue that helps bones glide over one another (called cartilage) wears away. Without cartilage, bones rub together and cause pain, stiffness, and swelling. Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis in people over the age of 50.

• *Who is affected?*

Today, more than 27 million Americans age 25 and older suffer from osteoarthritis. It is common in both men and women. However, in people over 50, more women than men get osteoarthritis. Individuals who are overweight or have jobs that stress certain joints are at higher risk.

• *How can I exercise if I have it?*

Believe it or not, exercise is a common form of treatment for osteoarthritis! If you have been diagnosed with osteoarthritis, ask your doctor about these 3 methods for improving your health through exercise. Strengthening exercises: Resistance bands, cans of soup, books, weights, or other resistance devices can strengthen the muscles around the affected area. Aerobic exercises: Activities that are light (such as walking, swimming, or using a stationary cycle) can improve blood flow and decrease pain. Stretching: Keeping yourself flexible is very important. It improves blood flow, decreases tension, and can relieve joint stiffness.

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

• *What is it?*

Rheumatoid arthritis is a form of arthritis that causes stiffness, swelling, pain, and loss of use of a joint. Unlike osteoarthritis, if rheumatoid arthritis occurs in one hand or knee, it is likely to develop in the other. It can also

affect other parts of the body by slowing down the red blood cell production or causing dry eyes and mouth. Scientists do not know the exact cause of rheumatoid arthritis, but believe it is due to a problem with the immune system.

• *Who is affected?*

Today, about 1.3 million Americans have rheumatoid arthritis. It occurs in all races, ethnicities, and age groups. Rheumatoid arthritis affects women much more than men.

• *How can I exercise if I have it?*

There are several ways to prepare your body for exercise (from reducing stress to dietary changes). Check with your doctor if you have been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis for the best way to get active. The key to exercising with rheumatoid arthritis is to get plenty of rest when the disease is active (painful) and enough exercise when the disease is inactive. Here are a few general guidelines for exercise. Strengthening exercises: Resistance bands, cans of soup, books, weights, or other resistance devices can be used to strengthen muscles and bones. Aerobic exercises: Light exercises (such as walking, swimming, or using a stationary cycle) should be done, but only to your capability. Stretching: Keeping yourself flexible is very important. It improves blood flow, decreases tension, and can relieve joint stiffness.

Most individuals with rheumatoid arthritis take medications. Check with your doctor before beginning any form of exercise to be sure you are healthy enough for the activity.

If you experience swelling, morning stiffness lasting longer than 30 minutes, joint pain, or redness in a joint you should see your family doctor or a doctor that specializes in arthritis (a rheumatologist). Arthritis is diagnosed based on symptoms, family history, medical history, and lab tests (like physical examinations or X-rays). Early detection is important in managing your arthritis. If you think you may have arthritis symptoms, do not hesitate to contact a doctor. Remember: early detection can decrease symptoms and improve long-term complications which can lead to a Healthier Tomorrow.

For more information:

- National Institute on Aging (NIA), P.O. Box 8057, Gaithersburg, Md., 208988057 TTY: 800-222-2225 Website: www.nia.nih.gov
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), 1 AMS Circle, Bethesda, Md., 20892-3675 TollFree: 877-22-NIAMS (226-4267) Website: www.niams.nih.gov

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