



Exercising with rheumatoid arthritis

Every move counts

Move more and reduce your sedentary time each day by incorporating different types of movement. It is never too late to start, some is always better than none!

How to get started

Regular exercise has been shown to help manage the symptoms of arthritis, improve muscle function, strengthen bones and improve overall joint function. It has also been shown to help maintain a healthy weight which can alleviate joint problems. Exercise also helps increase mobility, improve mood, decrease pain and reduce the chance of developing osteoporosis. Health benefits will occur without making your symptoms worse or causing joint damage.

Regular exercise can help to reduce the risk of heart problems. The increased risk of diseases in some arthritis patients, such as type 2 diabetes, stroke and atrial fibrillation, can be significantly reduced with a structured exercise plan.

You may experience increased levels of pain on starting regular exercise, particularly if you have been inactive. This pain is usually short lasting and is not a reason to stop you from exercising. Modify your exercise plan around your symptoms so that you maintain the maximum benefits of regular exercise. If you have arthritis in your feet, diabetes, have had back or hip surgery or are at risk of osteoporosis, talk with your doctor or healthcare provider before commencing an exercise plan.

Take all medicines as recommended by your doctor or pharmacist.

Warm up and cool down

Always start your exercise session with a 10–15-minute warm up to loosen up the muscles and raise the heart rate safely. Warm-up exercises include dynamic stretches, range-of-motion activities and low intensity movements. This can be done standing up, walking around, marching on the spot or seated.

Always end your exercise session with a 10–15-minute cool-down to ensure your heart rate and breathing rate return to normal safely. Cool down exercises include slowly decreasing the intensity of your activity and simple stretches.

Be active

Some is good, more is better

How much:	Aim for at least 150 – 300 minutes a week of moderate intensity or at least 75–150 minutes a week of vigorous intensity physical activity. Start moving more each day increasing to regular movement every day and add sessions as your strength and stamina improve.
How hard:	Any movement helps. Aim for moderate to intensity—aim to get slightly breathless. Take frequent breaks, if necessary. Expect some discomfort but not pain after your workouts.
How long:	Aim to spread out your session throughout the week. If your fitness level is low, start with 5–10-minute sessions and add 10-minute intervals until you can comfortably exercise for longer.

What type:	All physical activity counts. Avoid vigorous, highly repetitive exercises, particularly of your joints are unstable. Try low-impact activities within your abilities: walking, cycling, swimming, water aerobics, hiking—choose something you enjoy! Recreational team sports such as basketball, golf, and tennis are great social activities too! Household activities such as cleaning, gardening, vacuuming or walking your dog are great activities for your health
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What will it do for me?

Regular exercise significantly reduces your risk of getting other diseases, helps maintain a healthy weight, and results in pain reduction and less joint deterioration.

Build strength

How much:	At least twice a week unless severe pain or swelling present..
How hard:	Start with light muscle strengthening exercises and progress to moderate or greater intensities over time.
How long:	Choose a variety of 8–10 exercises targeting the upper and lower body and repeat each exercise 10–15 times. Try 1–2 sets.
What type:	A variety of strength exercises using free weights, resistance machines or household items such as a can of beans or a weighted water bottle as a weight. Strength exercises you can do at home include squats, calf raises, wall push-ups, arm curls, knee curls, front and side arm raise, and chair stand.

What will it do for me?

Exercise increases or maintains pain-free movement and improves overall muscle strength, which helps to improve your balance. Strength exercises improve mobility and help reduce symptoms such as muscle weakness and joint instability.

Improve balance

How much:	At least three days a week. Start with one session per week, if necessary, and gradually work towards two.
How hard:	Choose 2–3 balance exercises and repeat each exercise 10–15 times.
How long:	Hold each balance for 10-30 seconds.
What type:	Try yoga, Tai Chi or home balance exercises such as standing on one foot, a heel-to-toe walk or a balance walk lifting one leg at a time. Always exercise safely. If you are at high risk of falling, do seated balance exercises or use a sturdy chair or wall for support.

What will it do for me?

Practicing balance exercises helps to train your body to react more quickly to a loss of balance and can help reduce the risk of falls, fractures and injuries. Regular balance exercises help reduce joint instability, loss of balance and injuries common in older adults and individuals with arthritis.



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Sedentary living

Reduce the amount of time being sedentary. Move more and break up sedentary time. Sedentary behavior is defined as time spent sitting or lying with low energy expenditure, while awake in the context of occupational, educational, home and community settings, and travel. Higher amounts of sedentary behavior can increase the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

Replace sedentary behavior with more physical activity of any intensity (including light intensity). It is possible to avoid sedentary behaviour and be physically active while sitting or lying, through, for example, upper body led activities, inclusive and/or wheelchair-specific sport and activities. Try seated stretches for those with limited mobility; using active forms of transport; standing while working (within your abilities and environment), and other accessible active options to replace sedentary time.

Your exercise, your way!

Choose activities that are easy to start with, and that you enjoy. Always exercise within your abilities. If mobility is difficult, adapted cycling, swimming and chair-based exercises may be better alternatives. Exercise with friends and family or join a group class. Try exercising both indoors and outdoors and see which you prefer. Most importantly: **some physical activity is better than none!**

Exercise safety

Avoid high-impact activities, over-stretching and hypermobility, all of which can cause damage to unstable joints. Ensure all exercises are controlled and avoid 'rapid' movement that could cause joint problems.

Avoid exercise at times when your joint stiffness and pain is worse. Exercise on alternate days may be a useful starting point.

During a flare up, when your joints are inflamed, rest more and protect painful, swollen, or inflamed joints. Don't stop moving altogether, instead, focus on range of motion exercises and gentle stretches.

Ask your doctor for more information about how to exercise safely and effectively and how to maintain an exercise plan. Start with shorter sessions (e.g. 10–15 minutes) and slowly build up to the recommended level. Always exercise within your abilities.

Always wear comfortable clothing and shoes that give good support. Take frequent breaks if necessary, and drink water before, during and after exercise.

Choose environments that you can access freely and safely. Please ask your healthcare provider or local leisure organizations for advice on the best option for you.

Resources

Learn about free programs for Living Well with Arthritis by contacting the Arthritis Society (1-800-321-1433).

The Arthritis Society of Canada provides resources, videos and tips for healthy living: <https://arthritis.ca/living-well>



Scan for more
physical activity
resources!

