

Arthritis and water exercise

Arthritis is a general term describing over 100 medical conditions that cause pain, stiffness and inflammation in a joints. Regular gentle exercise is one of the most effective treatments for arthritis, improving flexibility of joints, muscle strength, general health and fitness.

Water exercise is one of the most comfortable and effective ways that a person with arthritis can exercise because the joints and muscles can be exercised while supported in the water. Activities such as stretching or walking through water can exercise the joints without putting them under strain.

The benefits of exercising in water

Some of the benefits of water exercise include:

- Increased muscle strength, posture and balance
- Enhanced sense of wellbeing, mood and sleep quality
- Greater mobility and flexibility of joints
- Improved endurance and fitness
- Eases stiff joints and relaxes sore muscles
- Reduced pain and fatigue (tiredness).

What is water exercise?

Water exercise involves exercising in a pool, usually heated, and may also be called 'hydrotherapy'. There are several different ways you can exercise in water. It depends on your type of arthritis and how it is affecting you, your fitness level, ability and interests:

- **Arthritis Victoria warm water exercise program** – offers classes specifically designed for people with arthritis. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of hydrotherapy pools and gentle water exercise classes in your area.
- **Hydrotherapy** – a type of exercise therapy offered by physiotherapists. Can be offered as a group session or as one-on-one training. If you are new to water exercise or your arthritis is limiting your ability to exercise, you may find one-on-one sessions in a hydrotherapy pool with a physiotherapist useful. Some hydrotherapy pools may have times when you can use the pool to do your own exercise program independently.
- **Gentle water exercise classes** – some fitness or recreation centres offer gentle water exercise programs suitable for older adults or people with health conditions such as arthritis.
- **Aquarobics or Water Aerobics class** – some fitness or recreation centres offer water exercise classes that aim to improve general fitness.
- You could swim laps at your local pool.

Before you join a class

Suggestions include:

- Always check with your doctor before starting any new exercise program. For example, you may need to avoid certain movements if you have had joint replacement surgery.
- Contact the various fitness and recreation centres in your local area to find out what sort of warm water classes are on offer.
- Assess the venue. For example, is the pool easy to access? Are the change rooms accessible and comfortable?

- Before choosing a class, make sure it is appropriate to your level of fitness and ability. You may like to watch a class or two from the sidelines.

Safety suggestions

Once at the pool, safety suggestions include:

- Be guided by your instructor, but a good way to warm up is to swim gently or go for a 'walk' through the water.
- It will take time to build up your fitness, so aim for no more than 20 minutes of exercise at first.
- If you feel light-headed, sick or dizzy at any stage, get out of the water.
- Take care when moving in wet areas around the pool, including in change rooms, to avoid slipping and falls.
- Don't try to do too much too soon. If you feel out of breath, slow down.
- Perform each movement as gracefully and smoothly as you can.
- Keep the body part you are exercising under the water. This may require you to squat or bob down at times.
- If a movement causes pain or discomfort, stop immediately.
- Drink plenty of fluids during and after exercising.
- If you have painful joints or sore muscles for more than a few hours after your class, try to go a little slower next time.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Arthritis Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041

Things to remember

- Warm water exercise is particularly helpful for people with arthritis, because the body is supported and the resistance of moving through water boosts muscle strength and endurance.
- Venues that may run warm water exercise classes include recreation centres, fitness centres, public swimming pools and retirement villages.
- See your doctor before embarking on any new physical activity program.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Physical Activity Australia

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