

*Better
Together*

Patient information

Inflammatory Arthritis and Exercise

Therapies Directorate

Why should I exercise?

Regular exercise has many benefits and studies have shown that exercise helps people with rheumatoid arthritis in many ways. Some examples of its benefits are:

- Makes muscles stronger.
- Makes joints more flexible.
- It can be very helpful in managing rheumatic diseases.
- Helps increase the range of motion of joints.
- Can help to reduce the amount of muscle spasming.
- Increases the flow of blood to muscles and joints, which promotes healing.
- Improves balance.
- Helps to achieve functional goals.

Other benefits not as closely related to rheumatoid arthritis include:

- Helps maintain a proper weight.
- Aids digestion.
- Can help sleep and overcome fatigue.
- Can help to protect thinning bones.
- Improves general fitness and thus aerobic capacity.

So all in all exercise helps you to feel fitter, healthier and happier!

What is stopping me from exercising?

- Pain.
- Fear of causing physical damage to joints and muscles.
- Tiredness.
- Bad past experiences.
- Lifestyle.
- Mood.

What exercise is suitable?

Good exercises include brisk walking, biking, tai chi, swimming and water aerobics. Exercises done in water can help relieve the pressure of gravity on joints while giving you aerobic exercise and stretching tight, sore muscles.

Exercises can be split into three main components:

Stretching

You may find that your joints often feel very stiff, especially first thing in the morning. This is because the less you move them the stiffer/more inflexible they will become. Stretching exercises aim to help maintain your range of movement and break up the pain-stiffness cycle.

Strengthening

It is extremely important to maintain a high level of strength in your muscles as they work to provide support for your joints and as a result help to make movement of your joints more efficient.

General fitness

It is also very important to maintain and improve your level of general stamina

And how much should I exercise?

It is important to 'listen' to your body. The purpose of exercise is to put each joint through its own natural movement. Eventually you will learn to understand your body's signals and know just how much to do and when to rest. Several short periods of exercise a day are much better than one long session.

Avoid exercising if your joints are tender, injured or severely inflamed. If you feel a pain that you have not felt before, stop exercising. New pain that lasts more than two hours after exercise usually means that you have overdone it!!

Follow the guidelines below and you can't go wrong...

- Your exercises should be carried out in a slow controlled manner.
- Start gently, one time through each exercise.
- If after 24 hours you feel alright, increase each exercise by a few repetitions.
- Stop if you are experiencing any problems and review the situation.
- If your muscles ache, but there is no increase in joint pain then it is fine to continue at this level.
- If your joint pain increases, then decrease the number of repetitions.
- If there is a marked increase in joint pain or swelling, stop and seek advice as you are probably going through a 'flare-up'.

What is a 'Flare-Up'?

A flare-up means that your joints are going through 'active inflammation'. You will feel that your joints are:

- Tender.
- Swollen.
- Hot.
- May experience sudden and severe pains.
- Your function may deteriorate.

You may also become feverish, tired and depressed and may lose your appetite.

If this happens it is a good idea to stop the exercises and try the following:

- Rest.
- Use an ice pack on the affected joint(s) *.
- Try to gently exercise any unaffected joints as able.
- Once the flare-up starts to settle, recommence gentle mobilisation so as to begin to regain your function as quickly and effectively as possible.

If the flare-up persists after a few days, it is advisable to seek medical attention for example from your specialist nurse, physiotherapist, family doctor (GP) or rheumatologist/consultant.

*** Warning: to avoid ice burns wrap ice pack in a damp towel and check skin regularly. Apply for no longer than 20 minutes.**

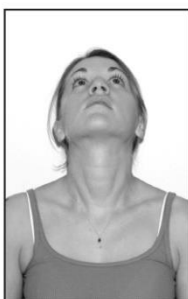
The Exercises

Stretches

To increase and maintain range of movement of your joints the following exercises should be done slowly and in a controlled manner. Do not 'bounce' the stretches. Try to hold each stretch for ten seconds and repeat five to ten times.

Neck

1. Sitting up tall, gently stretch your neck from side to side (take your ear to your shoulder).
2. Now take your eyes to the ceiling (looking upwards).
3. And then down to the floor (keeping your chin tucked in).
4. Lastly turn to look over your shoulder (both directions).



N.B. don't ever circle your head or combine the above movements.

Shoulder Girdle

1. Shrug your shoulders up to your ears, then push them down again.
2. Make large circling movements forwards and backwards with your shoulders.



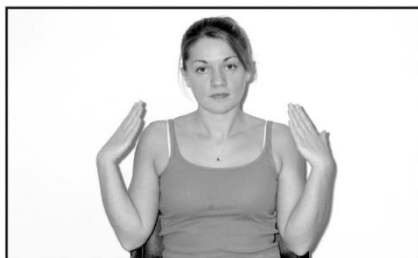
Shoulder

1. Standing or sitting with your elbows straight, lift both arms upwards and above your head as far as you can. It may help to clasp your hands together.
2. In tall sitting, place both hands behind your head and take your elbows backwards.
3. In standing reach your arm behind your back trying to walk the hand as far up your back as possible with your palms facing outwards.
4. In standing, take your arms out sideways from your body with palms facing forwards; try to lift them right above your head to clap each other at the top.



Elbow

1. In sitting or standing, bend and straighten your elbow as far as you can.
2. Sitting, with elbows tucked into you side; gently turn your palms up to the ceiling then down to the floor.



Wrist

1. With your forearms resting on a table/armchair, and your hand hanging over the edge, slowly bend your wrist up and down.
2. Sitting with elbows tucked into your side and forearms resting sideways on a table/armchair lift your wrist up and down. Make sure only your wrists are moving and not your elbows too.



Hands

1. Practice making a fist, then stretching your fingers out like a star.
2. Touch each one of your finger tips with your thumb and then slowly run your thumb down the length of each finger.
3. With your hand face down on a table and thumb stretched out as far as you can, slowly lift each finger up one at a time hold for three to five seconds, then 'walk' it towards the thumb.



Lower Back

1. Lying on your back with your knees bent up, gently roll your knees from side to side.
2. In the above position, push the small of your back downwards into the bed while tucking your bottom up underneath you. You should feel your lower stomach muscles working and your back flattening.
3. In the same position, pull one knee up to your chest, hold and then swap legs



Knees

1. In sitting, bend one knee back underneath you as far as you can, then straighten back out in front of you again.
2. Sitting, straighten one leg in front of you and slowly bend forward. You should feel a stretch behind the back of you thigh and knee.



Ankles

1. In sitting or lying, circle your feet round clockwise and anti-clockwise.
2. Positioned as above, now pull your toes up towards you then point them away from you.



Strengthening

These exercises will help to build and maintain the strength of your muscles so as to give your joints more support.

Thighs

1. Sitting with your legs out straight in front, push the back of your knee downwards. You should feel the thigh muscles tightening-hold for five seconds.
2. Now sit with your legs out straight and your back supported with a rolled up towel under your knee. Lift your heel off the bed by tightening the thigh muscles and straightening the knee while pulling your toes towards your body at the same time-hold for five seconds.



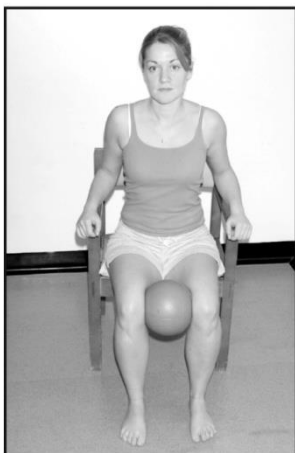
3. Practice standing up from a chair without using your arms to assist you.



4. Step up and down off the bottom step of you stairs, do a few leading with the left and a few leading with the right leg.
5. Try squatting down by bending the knees, then push straight up again.



6. Sitting in a chair with your feet facing forward, place a pillow/ball between your knees and squeeze it inwards with your knees.



7. Standing with support in front or to the side for balance, slowly take your leg out to the side, hold for five seconds and bring back in again. Make sure the rest of your body remains still.



Gluteals

1. Lying on your back with both knees bent up, push through your heels while squeezing your bottom and lifting it up off the bed, hold for five seconds, then relax.
2. In any position simply squeeze your buttocks together as hard as you can, hold for five seconds then relax.
3. Standing with support in front, slowly take your leg back behind you, hold for five seconds and return. Make sure the rest of your body remains still.

Abdominals

1. Lying on your back with your knees bent up, slowly reach forward with your right hand towards your left leg, hold for two seconds and relax. Repeat to the other side.

Posture

Poor posture can lead to further joint problems due to undue stresses going through your joints for long periods of time causing muscle lengthening and weakening.

Here are some basic principles for ensuring the best posture:

- Try to maintain the natural curve in your lower back while sitting, you may find a rolled up towel or cushion placed in the 'small' of your back may help.
- Try to keep your shoulders back and your chest out during sitting, standing and walking.

- Try to keep your chin tucked in, especially during sitting and driving.
- Try to adjust your environment to suit you, for example changing the height of a chair or the level of your computer/steering wheel etc.

How to achieve ‘perfect posture’

- Start in sitting on a chair or the edge of your bed.
- Now slump down as far as you can, make your shoulders ‘rounded’ and back curved as much as possible.
- Now slowly start to sit up, growing from the very bottom of your back, think of each bone in your back pulling upwards, finishing off at the neck.
- Imagine you have a piece of string attached to the back of your head helping to lift you up as tall as possible.
- You should now have all three curves down your spine visible.

Cardio-vascular exercises

Cardio-vascular (CV) exercise is very important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It is very good for the heart, lungs and circulation as well as releasing endorphins (happy hormones) and so is also good for the mind!

You should aim to do about 20-30 minutes of CV exercise two to three times per week.

The amount of this type of exercise you can do will vary depending on your current arthritic symptoms. It is a good idea to gain some advice from your GP or physiotherapist before taking on any CV exercises.

Here are some examples of CV exercises:

- Walking.
- Swimming.
- Cycling.
- Aerobic classes (low impact).
- Walking up and down stairs.

Other useful information

Aids and Appliances

You may require assessment for walking aids of which there are many varieties available. Your physiotherapist will advise you on the most appropriate for you and teach you how to use it correctly.

You may also be suitable for splinting. These are devices used to help support your joints, prevent further deformity and loss of range of movement. They can also help to reduce pain and improve function.

Occupational therapists can assess and supply you with various aids and appliances to make activities of daily living easier and ensure you maintain a level of independence.

Diet

Ensure that you have a well balanced and healthy diet. This will help provide you with energy and control your weight so as to minimise stress on your joints. You may require a referral to a dietician which can be done through you GP.

Further Information

Arthritis Research Campaign (ARC)

www.arc.org.uk

Tel: 0870 850 5000

National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society

www.rheumatoid.org.uk

Tel: 0845 458 3969

Arthritis Care

www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Freephone: 0808 800 4050

Dial UK (Disability Information & Advice)

www.dialuk.org.uk

Tel: 01302 310 123

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)

www.dlf.org.uk

Tel: 0845 130 9177

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