Osteoarthritis Recovery

by ANGELA FINLAY

Finding the Right Exercise and the Right Time to Rest

Striking the right balance between rest and activity is easier said than done, especially if you're living with a progressive condition like osteoarthritis. If you overdo it with exercise, not only will your energy stores suffer, you could actually do more harm than good for your joints and certainly limit osteoarthritis recovery. On the other hand, too much rest can chip away at the muscle mass you've worked so hard to build. So, how do you navigate this exercise challenge? Begin with smart substitutions, and a few good rest habits.

Modifying Exercise vs. Decreasing Activity

Active people are happy people, and in order to stay on the track to a happy life, consider modifying your routine to curb uncomfortable side effects instead of cutting exercise altogether:

- **Minimize joint impact**. High impact activities, like running, are obviously out of the question, but you'll also want to limit anything that involves stopping suddenly or changing directions quickly. These jarring motions can damage vulnerable joints, resulting in more inflammation than strength or cardiovascular benefits. Make use of water resistance or elliptical trainers instead of the hard ground, which will protect your joints during your workout.
- **Focus on range of motion instead of strength**. It's important to strengthen your muscles in order to ease pressure on your joints, but most of your regular exercise should focus on flexibility and mobility rather than targeted muscle building. The right activities will gradually build muscle with body weight resistance and strength through stillness. Pilates and yoga are better candidates than free weights and machines that target and test specific muscle groups.
- **Improve your balance**. Balance in general (and muscle balance, in particular) is especially important for those with weaker joints, bones or muscles. When your body is properly aligned, there will be less pressure on certain points, which means less risk of injury. Try slow and fluid exercises like Tai Chi; these movements promote patience, balance and coordination without taxing your cardiovascular system or any one muscle group.

Since every patient has a different degree of mobility and their own exercise personality, there's no one activity that can promise great improvement for everyone. However, several studies over the past decade have shown that a twelve-week Tai Chi program can significantly reduce the pain and stiffness of osteoarthritis, while increasing physical function. Even in the case of relatively mild activities like Tai Chi, you need to incorporate the right kind of rest to get the most out of your exercise routine.

How to Rest Properly

Most osteoporosis patients report pain that worsens with activity, but improves with rest. The key is to rest your joints and muscles so they can recuperate without falling into a period of inactivity; the less exercise you do in the long run, the more pain, stiffness and fatigue you will experience. A noticeable increase in pain, swelling or

stiffness in your joints means it’s time for a rest. If your inflammation is severe, doctors recommend you take a break for between twelve and twenty-four hours, bracing the limb or joint if needed. Once the swelling goes down, it’s best to get back on your feet right away; long bouts of inactivity could lead to muscle atrophy, a major loss of muscle mass and function. Finally, use all the resources around you to recover quickly and completely; anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen, heat and cold therapy, and gentle stretching can restore circulation and reduce swelling to get you back on your feet.