



Water Therapy for Osteoarthritis

by YVONNE BANKS

Using Water Therapy for Osteoarthritis

Exercise may be the last thing you want to do if you suffer from osteoarthritis. Though some types of activity may aggravate the condition, there are other things that you can do to get your exercise in without suffering pain afterwards. Water therapy is one such activity.

Water therapy has been found to reduce pain of lower extremity OA as well as improve functional status. Studies support the fact that this type of activity helps manage symptoms, slow OA disease progression, and may prevent the need for surgery.

Why Water Therapy?

The focus of water therapy for osteoarthritis is to increase strength in the extremities and improve general physical activity levels so that pain and functioning is improved. A pool provides the perfect environment to someone with OA to exercise because the buoyancy counteracts gravity, decreasing the weight placed on painful joints and the spine. This diminished weight-bearing stress allows you to exercise in the water even if you cannot perform many land-based exercises.

Additionally, the water encourages gentle movements that help to increase strength, endurance, and flexibility and helps you to retrain your musculoskeletal system to accommodate the effects of OA.

Patients with osteoarthritis of the spine are optimal candidates for water therapy. Activity such as sitting, standing, and walking can cause joints to become inflamed and cause pain in a person with spinal arthritis. The warm water of water therapy works to relieve the friction on the aggravated vertebrae and allows the patients to stretch their spine and flex the joints in a way that isn't possible out of the pool.

The simple immersion of the patient in warm water is a benefit in itself. The warm water can decrease pain by increasing the circulation of blood in areas of pain. Water exercise helps to improve heart function with the increased movement of the body and allows improved circulation of blood through the muscles and joints, whereby making recovery better and allowing the patient to build strength.

Water Therapy Exercises

The movements for water therapy are similar to what you would do in a physical therapy office. The advantage is that the water presents gentle resistance rather than the harsh gravity to exercise muscles and joints. Some of these exercises include:

- **Stretching:** To stretch hamstrings and the lower back, you would raise knees to the chest. You may also try stretching the upper back and neck by standing a foot or two from the side of the pool and lean in forward with arms outstretched against the edge of the pool.

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- **Strengthening:** You can opt to use light barbells to do bicep curls or other type of arm exercise against the water. The resistance increases the faster you move the barbell against the water.
 - **Water aerobics:** This can be a simple act of walking around the pool, simulating cross-country skiing movements, or a slow jog in the shallow part of the pool. This helps to loosen up the lower back and hips.