How Exercising Helps Manage Osteoarthritis Symptoms

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Exercises for Osteoarthritis – You Have to Move It, Move It

Exercises for osteoarthritis (OA) is essential for strengthening muscles, maintaining joint flexibility, and managing your mood and stress levels.

However, knowing that exercise helps OA is different than implementing a consistent exercise routine. How do you know which activities will help and which could make it worse? Or how do you decide when to exercise and when to rest?

When you are suffering from stiffness, pain, and fatigue, exercising feels like the last thing, you want to do. It can even feel counter-productive and make you worry that more injury could impact your symptoms.

I suffered a torn meniscus during a Zumba class that led to a microfracture procedure on my knee for cartilage loss. This experience has made me hesitant to exercise at times because I feel like one wrong move will land me back on the operating table and out of work for weeks.

Exercises for Osteoarthritis – How to Get Started

There are four areas of focus to consider when making fitness decisions. Each impacts your OA treatment in different ways. Maintaining muscle health, regular cardiovascular exercise, joint flexibility, and emotional health provide benefits for OA.

Maintaining Muscle Health

Your muscles help support your joints. Strengthening them eases the pressure on your joints, as well as losing weight. Pilates, yoga, and swimming provide benefits for muscle health.

Weight bearing exercises will help your muscles stay strong; try using just your bodyweight for a while before moving on to anything too heavy. Resistance bands can help you stretch comfortably while pushing yourself just a touch further, and are a big hit with physical therapists.

Regular Cardiovascular Exercise

Finding a kind of cardio will help maintain a healthy weight, which is key when it comes to easing OA pain.

Depending on your osteoarthritis symptoms, some exercises for osteoarthritis will work better than others. Swimming is OA's hero, providing a light, flexible workout without any impact on your joints. Being in the water is a time when I feel most like myself because of how freely I can move.

Joint Flexibility

Movement of any kind: Tai Chi, light stretching, low impact dancing, or cycling will help keep your joints moving. Gently pushing through the stiffness provides your joints with the flexibility they need to work properly.

You can work with a physical therapist to provide a well-rounded treatment with heat, ice, and specific exercises for your needs. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any exercise program to make sure you're aware of the risks and benefits for your particular health condition.

Emotional Health

Managing OA impacts your mood, with anxiety, depression, and irritability to keep at bay. Regular exercise is known to relieve and manage symptoms of stress related to chronic pain conditions of any kind.

Listening to music and doing any movement can help boost your mood, even if it's merely gently bending your knees along to the music as you brush your teeth. Try sitting on a stability ball and stretch while watching a comedy show to get some laughs in.

Get Creative With Your Exercises for Osteoarthritis

Find ways to keep your exercise routine changing. For example, cycle, swim and try a low impact Zumba class over the course of a week or two.

The following week, try varying the days to keep your routine fresh. If you do the same exercise repeatedly, you run the risk of overusing the same muscles and leave yourself prone to injury. You can also get bored and give up. Don't!

Pair Up!

Find a partner to help you stay motivated and hopefully someone who makes you laugh!

Walking or swimming together can make exercise more social and brighten your mood. Trying different classes at the gym or local rec center can spark new friendships and keep you on track.

Do It For a Cause

Get involved with a cause that you are passionate about and raise money while getting a great workout.

Many communities host fundraisers to donate to arthritis research, or you can volunteer your time and exercise for numerous worthy causes. You can join an existing event or start your own!

Try Something New

You always have to keep your own medical needs in mind, but thinking outside the box can help spice up your routine.

Baby goat yoga, Aqua Zumba, and aqua pole dancing are all on my list of things to try. Do an internet search for various exercise opportunities in your area to find something new to pique your interest.

Exercise vs. Rest

The most significant struggle I've learned to adjust to with OA is judging when to exercise and when to rest.

It can often feel like a constant tug of war between "push through the pain and stiffness" and "rest and recover." It's easy to overdo it with exercise and then feel as though you're doing the same with too much resting.

Do your best to listen to your body and try not to get discouraged.

Don’t Give Up!

Always keep trying to strike that balance between movement and rest. While recovering from a workout or flare-up, continue to try some light stretching or swimming if possible.

Added stiffness from too much sitting or resting isn’t going to help. At the very least, listen to your favorite workout songs to lift your mood as you walk around your home.

When you’re resting, remember to be kind to your body with good nutrition, sleep, and plenty of water. If you are unable to do much physically, you will feel better about taking care of yourself in other ways that will impact your exercising.

Exercise and Weight Control

The added weight is not your friend when it comes to OA. Every extra pound feels like an additional five to your knees and makes your body work harder when it’s already strained.

Exercising is easier when you have less weight to carry on your frame. As you gently increase your activity levels, watching your nutrition will keep your weight in a healthy range. These tips will help you on your weight loss journey:

- Reduce or eliminate sugar
- Drink a glass of water before every meal
- Add more vegetables and fruit to your osteoarthritis diet
- Keep treats for special occasions
- Watch portion control
- Keep track of your nutrition on an app like MyFitnessPal

Working On Your Fitness

Remember that exercising with OA is going to be a continuous journey of fighting the urge to lie down and wait to feel good enough to exercise. It’s the reverse.

Exercising helps your mood, your joints, and your body. You feel the benefits after, not before. Your sleeping will improve, you will most likely lose weight, and it can take your mind off your OA stress for a little while. Keep moving and find an exercise for OA that works for you.