



# ARTHRITIS, SPORT & YOU

Arthritis can affect people of all ages and can be painful causing you to become less athletic, not so says *Dr Cathy Speed*, consultant in rheumatology, sport and exercise medicine. Exercise is more important than ever

Staying fit and active is important for our health and well being; but sometimes, things get in the way. One such example is arthritis, particularly of the knees and hips. Arthritis is more common as we get older, but with improvements in diagnostic techniques we now recognize that it can affect all ages, even young people.

The cause is due to a variety of factors, including genetics, intrinsic physical makeup and the shapes of an individual's joints, diet, lifestyle and history of illness and injuries. Different types of arthritis can occur, and different approaches to medical treatment can be necessary.

When you develop arthritis you might expect that you need to reduce your exercise to protect the joint. This in fact is not the case: when arthritis occurs, exercise becomes even more important than ever, in order to promote flexibility in the joint, reduce joint and muscle stiffness, to control weight and to strengthen the muscles around the joints.

Without a regular exercise programme, the muscles tend to progressively weaken, as a natural reaction to the joint complaint. Importantly, exercise can also help to reduce the pain in the joint(s) and ultimately may help to reduce the speed of deterioration in the joint. The types of exercise that should be followed, and other interventions that may be taken, will vary between different individuals and different forms of arthritis.

Pain is typically the cardinal symptom of arthritis, and is usually the factor that stops an affected individual from being active. Pain management is essential to maintain muscle function and healthy activity levels and of

course to improve quality of life.

A healthy diet and weight control are important. For example, if you are heavy, even reducing your body weight by small amounts can reduce arthritic knee pain by 30 per cent.

Dietary measures and supplementation with glucosamine and chondroitin and/or Omega 3 and fish oil may be useful. You should discuss with a doctor whether vitamin D supplementation may be indicated, as it is important for bone and muscle health. However your level should first be checked and the effects of supplementation monitored.

Simple approaches to pain control such as regular paracetamol should be considered. The relative merits and potential risks of stronger medications can be discussed with your doctor. Injection therapies for arthritis are improving; for example, viscosupplement ('lubricant') injections can improve pain and function. Joint supports can help by keeping the joint warm, giving some confidence to using the limb properly, and in some cases redistributing the load at the joint. Supportive and well cushioned shoes are important and shock absorbing insoles can make a big difference to how the joint feels during and after play.

So what types of exercise should be considered in people who have arthritic joints, and what should be avoided?

High impact activity should be avoided in cases of arthritis affecting the lower limb, since the high impact can result in further joint damage. High impact activities include running, skipping, squash, some martial arts, and high impact aerobics.

Cycling, swimming, walking, are all recommended. Racket sports – and in particular tennis – is often still manageable. Tennis court surfaces



that are more 'cushioned', such as the modern astro-turf courts, and 'sprung' badminton court floors, are better for joints.

Those individuals with severe arthritis should prioritise water based exercise, tai chi, yoga and pilates in the first instance. Many activities can be performed after joint replacement and this should always be discussed with your doctors. All activity programmes should be started slowly and progressed carefully; do not overdo it and consider keeping a diary to chart progress.

Most individuals with arthritis who wish to be active would benefit from a customized programmes set to suit their particular needs in terms of pain management, strategies to optimize activity and fitness, and enhancement of quality of life.

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