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Physiotherapy advice for people with inflammatory arthritis

***Information for
patients and carers***

NHS Grampian Physiotherapy

Introduction

Inflammatory arthritis is a term used to describe a group of conditions which affect your immune system. This means that your body's defence system starts attacking the soft tissues around your joints instead of attacking germs and viruses. This can lead to pain, swelling and stiffness in your joints.

This group of conditions is also known as autoimmune diseases. The most common forms are Rheumatoid Arthritis and Psoriatic Arthritis.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists work closely with other members of the multidisciplinary team to make sure your condition is managed as well as possible.

Your physiotherapist will treat your signs and symptoms and provide you with advice and information on:

- Your condition
- How to manage your symptoms
- The role and benefits of exercise
- Self management of your condition including pacing
- Flare ups and how to manage them

The aim of physiotherapy is to help reduce pain and discomfort, prevent loss of joint function and to improve or maintain muscle strength and endurance. This will maintain or improve your overall physical function.

Exercise

Why do I need to exercise?

When you have arthritis, exercise is important for lots of reasons including:

- Help keep your joints flexible and reduce stiffness
- Keep your muscles strong which helps support your joints
- Improve your cardiovascular fitness
- Strengthen bones and maintain bone density
- Help to relieve pain
- Help with weight control
- Improve your sleep and give you more energy
- Improve your overall sense of well being

All of these help you to maintain or improve your day to day function.

When and how much should I exercise?

With arthritis it is sometimes difficult to know when to exercise and when to rest. If the inflammation is very active, rest can be helpful but remember that too much rest may allow your joints to stiffen and the muscles to weaken. You should be as active as your joints allow you to be.

It's very important to remember that exercise won't damage your joints as long as the appropriate exercises are done in the correct way. Your physiotherapist will advise you about this.

Finding an exercise you enjoy and which suits your lifestyle is important. You can either carry out an exercise programme at home as advised by your physiotherapist or find an alternative exercise such as swimming.

There may also be exercise classes available in your local area or you may wish to attend a local gym. It's important to remember that not all exercise is appropriate for people with inflammatory arthritis so if you are going to local exercise classes or the gym do let the fitness instructor know about your condition.

Remember there are lots of activities that you already do which incorporate exercise, such as housework, gardening, walking to the bus and going up and down stairs.

Finding the right time of day for you to exercise will help get into a routine. If your joints feel stiffer in the morning it may be helpful to do some stretches in bed before you get up.

Warmth helps to loosen your joints and muscles before exercise so you may find it helpful to do your exercises after your shower or bath.

Avoid staying in the same posture or positions for long periods throughout the day. This will help to relieve joint pain and stiffness. Try to keep moving regularly and change your position often.

What exercises should I do?

A physiotherapist can advise you on an individual exercise programme for you to carry out. There are three main types of exercise to consider:

1. Stretching/range of movement exercises
2. Strength exercises
3. Cardiovascular exercises

1. Stretching / range of movement exercises

These are very important for people with arthritis to maintain or increase range of movement of the joint and soft tissues around the joint.

Stiffness and tightness can build up very gradually without you noticing. Moving each joint through its full range of movement until a gentle stretch is felt should be done between 3 and 5 times for each joint at least 3 times a week. Do not jerk or push your joint to the point that you feel pain.

2. Strength exercises

These exercises are designed to work your muscles with the aim to increase your muscle strength and endurance. As the muscles become stronger they provide greater support and protection for your joints.

Everyday activities such as stair climbing help to strengthen your muscles. If you are thinking about using equipment such as small weights or going to the gym please discuss this with your physiotherapist.

Do not do strengthening exercises on an inflamed joint; you must wait until the inflammation has settled.

3. Cardiovascular exercise

The aim of cardiovascular exercise is to improve your overall level of physical fitness. This sort of exercise should be of “moderate intensity”; that is it should leave you feeling slightly out of breath.

The amount of exercise that you take depends on your level of fitness. Start slowly and build up gradually. It’s recommended that everyone does up to 30 minutes of exercise 3 to 5 times a week. This can be difficult if you have joint pain so try to break this down smaller bouts of 5 to 10 minutes, 3 to 4 times a day.

Ideal forms of exercise are walking, swimming or cycling. Low impact exercise classes such as pilates, tai chi and general fitness groups can also be helpful. Discuss which classes would be best for you with your physiotherapist.

Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy is a set of exercises carried out in warm water. Exercising in water takes the weight off painful joints.

Many people find the warmth of the water eases their joint pain and allows them to exercise more easily. Ask your physiotherapist for more information on this.

General advice about exercise

- Appropriate footwear is very important. Usually trainers are best for exercising. Footwear needs to fit properly and have a soft well cushioned sole.

If you have issues with your feet discuss this with your GP, consultant or physiotherapist. They may refer you to a podiatrist or orthotist (who can provide specialist advice).

- Discuss exercise with a healthcare professional before you start.
- Pick an exercise or activity that you enjoy.
- Plan the exercise or activity. Start gently and increase gradually. Generally little and often is best.
- Try and build exercise into your daily routine.
- Set yourself goals; this will help to keep you motivated.
- Use an exercise diary to show your progress.
- Involve friends and family. They could keep you company and make exercise more enjoyable.

When should I not exercise?

If certain activities or exercises cause you some discomfort which settles down within one to two hours, then this is normal when you have inflammatory arthritis. However, if you have pain that lasts for more than two hours or if the pain and stiffness is more marked the next morning your body is telling you that you have done too much. This one/two hour rule is a useful one for you to remember.

Never push your joints to where they feel painful. Pain is a reliable measure; be guided by this. Do remember your joints and/or muscles may feel uncomfortable after exercise especially if you are not used to doing exercise.

When weight bearing joints (hips, knees, ankles and feet) are painful and swollen it is best to rest and reduce the amount of walking and standing you do.

Don't keep doing an exercise that causes lasting pain or discomfort and don't exercise a joint that is already hot and inflamed.

Day	Exercise	Duration/repetitions	How did you feel?	Other comments
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				

Other treatments available

Your physiotherapist can also offer you other treatments to help you manage your symptoms. These include:

- Different forms of pain relief such as TENS, acupuncture, electrotherapy and soft tissue massage
- Provision of appropriate walking aids
- Taping

Contact details

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