



HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
Trusted advice for a healthier life

Exercise can ease rheumatoid arthritis pain

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) can cause pain and stiffness that makes moving the last thing you want to do.

But staying active is important. Not only is it beneficial for your general health — it's also a way to strengthen your joints, improve your range of motion, and give you the opportunity to take part in the activities you enjoy.

For people with RA, it's best to take a cautious and strategic approach when starting an exercise program. An individualized program — ideally developed with the help of a physical therapist — can help you protect vulnerable joints while strengthening surrounding muscles. A well-rounded exercise program should include each of these elements:

Aerobic conditioning. Exercise that increases your heart rate and breathing rate has many benefits, including lowering your chances of developing conditions such as diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. It's especially important for people with rheumatoid arthritis because they are more prone to developing heart disease than people without RA. When choosing aerobic activities, people with rheumatoid arthritis should consider low-impact exercises such as swimming, bicycle riding, and walking.

Resistance training. Weak muscles, whether due to inactivity or to the side effects of medications like steroids, can diminish your stamina and leave joints less stable.

Isometric exercises — exercises that involve muscle contractions with no movement, such as clasping your hands and pressing your arms together — can be a great way to start resistance training. When pain is under control, free weights or weight machines are good options for building muscle and increasing strength.

Stretching and flexibility exercises. Joints damaged by rheumatoid arthritis don't move with the same ease or to the same degree (also called range of motion) as healthy joints. That makes activities that lengthen and strengthen the muscles surrounding your joints, such as stretching exercises, tai chi, and yoga, especially important for people with RA.

Balance exercises. Having rheumatoid arthritis can cause problems with gait and balance, leaving you more vulnerable to stumbles and falls. A physical therapist can recommend individualized balance-training exercises. These may include practicing standing on one leg or exercises to strengthen core muscles.