If you have arthritis, you may worry that exercise could cause you more pain and damage to your joints. In fact, in most cases the opposite is true.

**Exercise is the best non-drug treatment for arthritis.** Research has shown that it has the following benefits:

- Reduces joint pain
- Boosts energy and mood
- Makes it easier to do daily tasks such as bathing, fixing meals, and climbing stairs
- Strengthens muscles that support your joints, which helps them work better
- Increases blood flow to your joints, which helps ease swelling and stiffness
- Helps you take off excess weight and keep it off, which eases pressure on your joints
- Helps stop or slow down bone loss
- Helps improve your balance and prevent falls, which helps you stay independent longer

Review the list of benefits above one more time and check those that are important to you.

**Follow these guidelines for safety:**

- **Ask your doctor, physical therapist, or health coach for an exercise plan** that is right for you. Ask what exercises you should focus on or avoid. Find out how long and hard to exercise. Ask how to use cold, heat, and medicines for aches and pains.
- **Start low and go slow.** Have you been inactive? You may be able to walk only a few minutes at a time. Begin there. Build up slowly over time. Try to add to your minutes or how often you walk, as your doctor recommends.
- **Support your joints.** Avoid high-impact movements that affect your joints with arthritis. Wear comfortable shoes that fit you well. Choose shoes that are suited for the exercise you do. Ask your doctor about wearing insoles, braces, or wraps.
• **Adjust your exercise as needed** so you can stay active. When your symptoms are worse, try changing the kind of exercise you do. Or exercise less often and for shorter periods.

• **Talk with exercise class leaders** before you sign up. Describe your arthritis. Also describe any other activity limits you have. Ask how the class fits with your needs and limits. Discuss new classes or activities with your doctor before starting. Look for classes for people with arthritis.

• **Some increase in pain, stiffness, and swelling is normal when you start an exercise program.** It may take six to eight weeks for your joints to adjust. Stick with it!

• **Signs that you should see your doctor:**
  - Large increases in swelling
  - Joints that are red or feel hot
  - Sharp, stabbing pain that is constant
  - Pain that lasts more than two hours after exercise or gets worse at night
  - Pain that causes you to limp
  - Pain that does not get better with rest, hot/cold packs, or pain medicine

### Types and amounts of exercise

Any physical activity is better than none. Be as active as your health allows!

1. **Aerobic**
   - Rewards: strengthens your heart and lungs, gives you energy, builds stamina, helps you lose excess weight and keep it off.
   - Do moderate or vigorous activities (described below) that you enjoy and that do not twist or pound your joints too much. Some people with arthritis can run and even play tennis or basketball. Others cannot. Choose what is right for you.
   - Guidelines: Build up to 150–300 minutes of moderate activity per week, OR build up to 75–150 minutes of vigorous activity per week, OR do an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous activity. Spread the minutes over most days of the week. Do at least 10 minutes at a time.
   - Examples of moderate activity (makes your heart beat a little faster and you can talk easily but not sing):
     - Brisk walking (e.g., outdoors, at the mall, on a treadmill, following a DVD)
     - Biking (e.g., outdoors, on a stationary bike, on a recumbent bike)
     - Swimming or water aerobics (Note: Water helps take the weight off your joints and provides some resistance. Warm water also eases pain.)
     - Social dancing
     - Gardening

(continued on next page)
• Examples of vigorous activity (makes your heart beat much faster and you may not be able to talk comfortably without stopping to catch your breath):
  – Spinning classes
  – Jogging/running
  – Singles tennis
  – Aerobic dance
  – Sports (e.g., soccer, basketball)
• Adjust your effort so that you are working hard but not short of breath. Keep in mind that what is moderate for one person may be vigorous for another.

2. Muscle strengthening
• Rewards: strengthens the muscles that support your joints, improves joint function.
• Examples: Lift light weights. Use elastic tubing. Use weight machines. Use your body weight, such as push-ups and sit-ups. Do heavy gardening such as digging.
• Guidelines:
  – Work all major muscle groups at least two times per week. Include legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms.
  – Lift and return slowly and smoothly.
  – Always include opposing muscles, such as biceps and triceps.
  – Build up slowly until you can do 8–12 repetitions of each exercise (one “set”).
  – Slowly build up sets or the amount of weight.
  – Do not hold your breath or fully straighten your knees or elbows.
  – Allow a day off between sessions that work the same muscles.
  – Learn proper form from a trainer or DVD so you do not hurt yourself.

3. Flexibility
• Rewards: increases range of motion, prevents stiffness, improves joint function.
• Examples: stretching, yoga.
• Guidelines: Each day move each joint slowly through its full range of motion. Go as far as you can in each direction without causing pain. Hold each stretch for 10–30 seconds. Do not hold your breath. Repeat 8–12 times per joint each day.
• Warm up before you stretch. Avoid stretches that cause pain.
• Many people skip stretching because of the time it takes. Keep in mind that stretching can easily be done while doing other things. For example, stretch while you watch TV or talk on the phone.
4. Balance (especially if you are older than age 65, have fallen in the past, are limited in your usual activities, or have other chronic conditions as well as arthritis)
   - Rewards: less risk of falls, fractures, and disability.
   - Examples: tai chi, walking backward, side stepping, heel and toe walking, standing on one foot
   - Guidelines: Do balance exercises at least three days per week.

5. Movement throughout the day
   - Rewards: lessens joint stiffness and pain.
   - Examples: Park farther from where you work or shop. Take the stairs instead of an elevator. Walk to do errands when you can.
   - Guidelines: Try using a pedometer. Slowly build up to 7,000–10,000 steps per day or as directed by your doctor.
   - Find ways to move while you do other things. Walk while you talk on the phone. Walk and talk with friends and family.
## Take Action

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<tr>
<th>My SMART goal for this week</th>
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<td>Do your best to reach the SMART* goal you set with your health coach. Write it here. Check the box when you have completed it.</td>
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## Staying on the path to wellness

When you are ready, choose one or two tips above that you would like to put into action. Set a weekly SMART goal for each one. Write your goals here. Check the boxes when you have completed them.

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<th>SMART Goal 1:</th>
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*SMART goals are specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, and timely. For example, “Next week on Tuesday, I will call my local YMCA and ask about exercise classes for people with arthritis.”

SMART goals help you succeed! If you have any trouble setting your weekly SMART goals, ask your health coach for help.

The information in this tip sheet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Before making changes, always talk to your doctor about what is right for you.

Sources: