

# LET'S GET PHYSICAL

## The Truth about Exercise's Benefits for Arthritis

By David W. Romness, MD

When you're tired, achy, and your arthritis is acting up, going for a bike ride or walking on the treadmill is often the last thing you want to do. But exercise is often the best thing you can do to make those aches and pains subside.

Rest and relaxation, while perhaps beneficial for mental stress, is not particularly helpful to arthritic joints. Inflammation sets in when the joint is not in motion. Lack of exercise weakens muscles around the joint and makes bones softer and more prone to breaking.

Physical activity, on the other hand, lubricates the joints and promotes circulation to afflicted areas. Joints actually become less stiff as they are gently coaxed through their full ranges of motion.

### An Effective Pain-Management Tool

Simply going for a short walk or swim can have an immediate effect in terms of pain relief. And the long-term benefits of exercise are even more profound. The right kinds of exercise strengthen the muscles surrounding joints, so they don't have to bear as much of the load. Exercise reduces fatigue, elevates mood, and can enable weight loss, which can have a profound effect on pain and mobility, even in small increments.

A regular exercise program has proven so effective in day-to-day pain management that many patients consider it an alternative to more invasive forms of treatment. In fact, patients who have experienced such an acute level of suffering that they are on the verge of undergoing joint replacement surgery have reversed their symptoms with dedicated exercise programs. Exercise enables them to delay the need for surgery for years or, in some cases, avoid it altogether.

### Low-Impact Exercises Are Best

The most beneficial forms of exercise are those that encourage motion without load and strengthen the muscles around the joint. Swimming, cycling, and elliptical training are all excellent choices. Walking has some load but is low impact enough to be safe.

Properly performed weight lifting is also beneficial. It is often advantageous to work with a trainer at first until you become familiar with the equipment. However, high-impact exercises such as running, tennis, and basketball, all of which put extreme stress on joints and tendons, are much more prone to causing injury and should be undertaken with a physician's guidance.

For arthritic patients, care and common sense are essential. So-called weekend warrior syndrome — being inactive all week and then engaging in a burst of activity on the weekend — is one of the most common causes of sports-related injuries and is an especially dangerous pitfall for those with arthritis.

Ease into your workout slowly. Start out walking five to 10 minutes and then work up to half an hour. Just a brief, brisk stroll will pay dividends in terms of pain relief and will save you the risk of straining your muscles.

### Beat Arthritis, Not Yourself

It is important to stretch your muscles before and after exercise and warm up arthritic joints by flexing them gently. If you are experiencing pain in your joints, try applying heat to the affected area before beginning your workout. And icing the joints for 15 minutes after working out can prevent swelling.

While exercising, pay attention to your body. Forget the "no pain, no gain" philosophy. If what you are doing starts to hurt, ease up or take a break. If you experience acute pain, swelling, or any mechanical symptoms such as catching, locking, and buckling, call your physician right away.

Arthritis doesn't have to slow you down. While exercise doesn't require you to visit your physician, obtain a prescription, or even spend much money, it is one of the most effective methods to beat arthritis pain — and one of the healthiest, too. [COR](#)



**David W. Romness, MD**, received his medical degree from Eastern Virginia Medical School in 1984, and completed surgical and orthopaedic training at the Mayo Clinic in 1990. He is certified by the

American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery and is a Fellow in the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Dr. Romness is past President of the Virginia Orthopaedic Society and the Washington Orthopaedic Society. He is a member of the Eastern Orthopaedic Association, American Association of Hip and Knee Surgeons, Arlington County Medical Society, and Medical Society of Virginia.