

Exercise and osteoarthritis



What is osteoarthritis?

Arthritis is inflammation, swelling, or tenderness in one or more of your joints. A joint is where two or more bones meet to allow movement. (E.g. the area between your thigh bone and shin bone is your knee joint).

The main symptoms include pain and stiffness. It's important to note that you can be asymptomatic, meaning you have no symptoms at all.

The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis (OA), which is 'wear and tear' in the joints. The main areas affected by OA include the knees, hips, and hands. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that 1 in 5 Australians over the age of 45 have OA.



What causes osteoarthritis?

Scientists are yet to find out what causes OA and currently there is no cure. It can be a debilitating condition with pain and immobility but there are lots of management strategies to try. Exercise has been found to be the most effective.

Exercise is essential for physical and mental health and can play a vital role in the management of arthritis. Regular activity keeps the muscles around affected joints strong. It decreases bone loss and can help control joint swelling and pain. It can also help keep the joint lubricated and reduce stiffness.

Our goal is to empower you with knowledge and recommendations to manage your condition, so you can get back to doing the activities you enjoy.



How can I manage it?

Managing OA requires a 'whole person' approach. This means your strategy considers physical, mental, and social factors. Don't just focus on the symptoms!

The best strategy has three parts:

1. Learn about your condition and understand the different treatment options.
2. Exercise daily to help relieve symptoms and improve function.
3. Reduce your body weight to minimise the weight your joints carry.

National and international guidelines recommend exercise for the management of OA regardless of age, or which joints are involved, or pain intensity.

Some of the benefits of exercise for OA include:

- Reduced pain
- Increased muscle strength to support and stabilise joints
- Improved joint movement and flexibility
- Improved balance and [decreased risk of falls](#)
- Losing weight that reduces the load on sore joints
- Improved ability to do daily tasks
- Improved [emotional health](#) and mood
- Better [quality of sleep](#)

What exercise is best?

The best exercise for you will depend on what you enjoy, your goals, and your lifestyle. If you aren't sure what is suitable for you, seek advice from your doctor or allied health professional.

You should aim to complete at least 30 minutes of activity on most days no matter your age, weight, or health status. A more gradual approach may be necessary if you have severe joint pain.

Following are some helpful exercise options for OA:

1. Strength exercise
2. Aerobic exercise
3. Exercising in water

1. Strength exercise

Strength exercise can sometimes sound daunting but it shouldn't be. Strength exercise is simply moving your body against some form of resistance.

Resistance could mean using weights, [elastic bands](#), or moving against your body weight. You can practice these exercises at home or in the gym.

This type of exercise improves your muscle strength, which takes pressure off sore joints. It can also improve your balance, reduce the feeling of 'giving way', and improve your ability to do daily tasks.

2. Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise is any activity that increases your heart rate and makes you breathe harder.

Regular aerobic exercise helps you:

- Sleep better
- Burn calories for weight management
- Increase your energy levels

These benefits improve your general health, as well as helping you manage OA. Some aerobic activities you could try include [walking](#), swimming, or using a stationary bike.



3. Exercising in water

[Exercising in water](#) can be very helpful for people who suffer with severe OA.

Water has natural buoyancy, which means it can support objects to float. This provides extra support for the body and reduces the weight put on painful joints.

Water exercise can be useful before progressing to land-based exercise. It can also be helpful in combination with other forms of exercise.

Other types of helpful exercise include [Tai Chi](#), [balancing exercises](#), and [stretching exercises](#). There are also [hand exercises](#) you can do. These all improve the range of motion of joints and muscles.



Helpful tips

- Your doctor or allied health professional can give you exercise advice that is specific to you and your condition.
- Begin a new activity program slowly and progress gradually.
- Don't try to do too much too soon. If you feel out of breath or uncomfortable, slow down.
- If you stop exercising, you stop feeling the benefits. Use [strategies to help you stay on track](#). Try keeping an exercise diary, setting achievable goals, and asking a friend to join you. Keeping it interesting by doing a variety of exercises also helps.
- If you are overweight, losing weight by [modifying your diet](#) can help reduce your pain and improve the outcomes of your exercise program.

Tips to manage pain

- If you have recently had a joint replacement, find out from your health professional which movements to limit or avoid.
- Avoid hard activity during flare ups or when in serious pain.
- Try to exercise at a time of day when pain is the least severe for you.
- There may be a bit of soreness in the joint during exercise. This is normal and doesn't mean that the arthritis is getting worse. If there is significant pain or swelling during or after exercise then the program may need to be adjusted.
- People with significant pain, should complete as much exercise as they can comfortably manage.
- Asking your family or friends for help can benefit you, as well as help them understand your pain experience.

Assistive products for osteoarthritis



Adjusting the simple things you use every day can reduce stress on your joints.

Raising the height of your chair makes standing and sitting easier. Using a smaller, lighter saucepan reduces the weight you have to lift, preventing joint strain. Using special jar openers can prevent pain or injury.

If OA is affecting your daily activities, you can find a range of [assistive products](#) that can make your life easier. Take the quick [LiveUp quiz](#) to find your suggestions today.

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