Strength training

ARTHRITIS INFORMATION SHEET

This sheet has been written for people with arthritis to provide general information about strength training (exercises to improve muscle strength). It includes information about how to get started and what to look for in a strength training class. This sheet does not provide individual exercises or specific advice for each type of arthritis. It is recommended that people with arthritis consult a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or other qualified health professional for advice specific to your needs before starting strength training.

What is strength training?

Strength training is a name for activities or exercises that build the strength of your muscles. Strength training involves working your muscles a little harder than you do in normal life, usually against some form of resistance. You can do this with hand weights (dumbbells), leg weights (cuffs), gym machines, resistance bands or even just your own body weight (eg. doing push ups or squats). Strength training is not just for young people or body builders. People of all different ages, abilities and fitness levels can benefit from strength training. When beginning, the exercises should be tailored to your ability, strength and fitness, and gradually progressed as you get stronger.

What are the benefits of strength training?

Strength training can increase the strength, endurance and size of muscles. This can help to:

- support joints and reduce the amount of strain/ stress
- improve posture
- improve mobility and balance
- improve bone density
- increase your stamina, meaning you can do more without getting as tired
- lose weight (as you gain more muscle your body burns more calories, even at rest)
- improve your sense of wellbeing, confidence and mood.

Why is strength training important for arthritis?

Muscle weakness and wasting is very common in arthritis, as a result of pain and difficulty moving. It is common to feel very fatigued (tired) and have less stamina (not be able to do as much as you used to be able to do). These factors can also contribute to lower levels of activity, poor balance and loss of independence. Research has shown that people with arthritis can safely participate in strength training and can prevent, and even reverse, muscle weakness. Regular strength training, under the supervision of a qualified health or exercise professional, is recommended as part of an exercise program for people with arthritis.

What are the keys to successful strength training?

To get the most benefit from strength training, you need to:

- Start with close supervision from a qualified health or exercise professional who understands arthritis, ideally a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist.
- Learn the right way to do the exercises to prevent injury or making your condition worse
- Work with your health or exercise professional to figure out how much resistance to add, and how to adapt the exercise or resistance if it is too difficult
- Keep challenging your muscles by gradually adding more resistance, doing more repetitions (numbers) of the exercise and regularly changing the exercises in your program.

What should I look for in a strength training program or class?

There are several different things you should look for when choosing a strength training program, including:

- **Supervision.** It is important to find a program that is supervised or overseen by a qualified health or exercise professional. This could be a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or fitness leader with additional arthritis specific qualifications or experience working with people with arthritis.

- **Screening**. A good quality program will ask you to complete a short pre-exercise screening form to make sure it is safe for you to join the program.
- **Monitoring.** A good program will regularly reassess certain movements to ensure you are improving your strength, mobility, balance, and change your exercises as required. These improvements should mean that daily activities become easier.

How is a strength training class structured?

Every strength training class should consist of a:

- **Warm-up** - beginning with gentle movements of the muscles and joints through their full range of joint movement. The activity is gradually increased to elevate both heart rate and breathing - preparing the body for exercise (5-10 minutes).
- **Conditioning** - is where the exercise intensity is increased and strength and endurance are improved (20-30 minutes).
- **Cool-down** - lowers the heart rate and breathing back to normal and assists in removing waste products from muscles, reducing muscle soreness (5-10 minutes).

How do I get started?

If you have arthritis and are new to strength training, start by seeing a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist who can suggest the best exercises for your ability. They can also ensure you are doing the exercises correctly to prevent injury.

Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of qualified health or exercise professionals and suitable strength training exercise classes in your area. Classes may be held at physiotherapy clinics, gyms, fitness centres, community health centres, local halls or community centres or other venues.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Strength training is beneficial for people with arthritis. See a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or other qualified health professional to get started safely.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Websites:

To find a physiotherapist, ask your doctor, contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'find a physio' feature at **www.physiotherapy.asn.au**

To find an exercise physiologist, ask your doctor, contact Exercise and Sports Science Australia on (07) 3171 3335 or use the 'find an accredited member' feature at **www.essa.org.au**

Fitness Australia **www.fitnessaustralia.com.au**

For exercise tips and additional resources visit **www.movingwitharthritis.org.au** to help you self-manage your arthritis through improved mobility.

© Copyright Arthritis Australia 2016. Reviewed May 2024. **Source**: A full list of the references used to compile this sheet is available from your local Arthritis Office. The Australian General Practice Network, Australian Physiotherapy Association, Australian Practice Nurses Association, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners contributed to the development of this fact sheet.

Disclaimer: This sheet is published by Arthritis Australia for information purposes only and should not be used in place of medical advice.