



## Exercise

- Exercise can help reduce the symptoms of arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions
- Gentle exercises such as warm water exercise and tai chi can be very helpful
- Plan your exercise program in consultation with your doctor and physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or fitness professional

Arthritis covers over 150 different musculoskeletal conditions that affect the muscles, bones and/or joints.

### Your musculoskeletal system

To understand how arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions work, let's start with a little about the muscles, bones and joints that make up your musculoskeletal system.

Your **joints** allow movement at the meeting point of two bones. A firm cushion of **cartilage** covers the ends of both bones, absorbing shock and letting them glide smoothly over each other. The joint is wrapped inside a tough capsule of **synovial fluid** that lubricates the cartilage and other structures in the joint to keep it moving smoothly.

**Ligaments** hold the joint together by joining one bone to another. **Tendons** attach muscles to the bones. As your muscles contract, they pull on the bones to make the joint move.

Arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions affect the normal functioning of the joints, muscles, bones and surrounding structures. The way this happens will depend on the condition you have.

Musculoskeletal conditions can cause pain, stiffness and often inflammation in one or more joints or muscles. Regular exercise can reduce some symptoms and improve joint mobility and strength.

**Benefits of exercise for musculoskeletal conditions** lubricates and nourishes your joints

eases joint pain and stiffness

improves flexibility

strengths muscles

improves your balance

helps you sleep better

improves posture

improves or maintains the density of your bones

improves overall health and fitness

lowers stress levels

improves your mood

helps you maintain a healthy body weight.



## Types of exercise for musculoskeletal conditions

Australian guidelines recommend we should try to exercise most days of the week. If you aren't sure which exercises suit you, talk with your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist. It's important to find some you like and there are lots to choose from:

- tai chi, Pilates, yoga, aerobics – you can do these in person, or follow classes online or on DVD
- swimming, water exercises
- chair exercises
- classes at gyms and fitness centres
- cycling
- tennis, cricket, basketball
- croquet, lawn bowls
- active video games – for example Wii Fit, Nintendo Switch
- online exercises
- walking the dog
- skipping rope
- strength training using free weights and resistance bands
- dancing.

## Variety is important

You need a variety of exercises that address the following:

- **flexibility** – stretching and range of movement exercises help maintain or improve joint flexibility and nearby muscles. They keep your joints moving properly and ease joint stiffness.
- **strength** – these exercises build muscle strength, provide joint stability, improve your bone health and your ability to perform daily tasks.
- **overall fitness** – exercises that get you moving and increase your heart rate (e.g. walking, swimming, cycling) will help improve your heart and lung health (cardiovascular system). They may also improve endurance, assist weight loss and prevent other health problems like diabetes. This type of exercise is also called aerobic exercise, cardiovascular exercise or 'cardio'.

## Staying motivated

Getting and staying motivated is often a big challenge with exercising, especially if you're living with chronic pain and fatigue. But exercise is vital for managing your condition. Here are some tips to keep motivated:

- exercise with friends
- join a group or class
- remind yourself of the benefits of exercise
- make exercise a part of your daily routine
- set goals
- make it fun.

## Stay safe while exercising

Exercise is important and has many health benefits, but do it safely to prevent injuries or aggravating your condition.

Your doctor or exercise professional can give personal exercise advice. Here are some general suggestions:

- see your doctor before starting a new exercise program. If you've had a joint replaced, ask your surgeon or health professional which movements to limit or avoid.
- pre-exercise screening highlights potential risks for people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of a health problem during physical activity. This filter or 'safety net' will help you decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks. Check out the Exercise & Sports Science Australia (ESSA) adult pre-exercise screening tool and discuss it with your doctor or exercise professional.  
[https://www.essa.org.au/Public/ABOUT\\_ESSA/Adult\\_Pre-Screening\\_Tool.aspx](https://www.essa.org.au/Public/ABOUT_ESSA/Adult_Pre-Screening_Tool.aspx)
- don't exercise a painful, inflamed or hot joint. Instead, gently move the joint through its range of movement to help reduce stiffness and improve circulation.
- start gently and gradually increase the intensity of your exercise program over weeks or months.
- warm up thoroughly beforehand. Cool down after exercise with gentle, sustained movements.

- pay attention to good technique and try to move smoothly. Don't force a joint beyond a comfortable range of movement.
- don't try to do too much or push too hard too soon. If you're short of breath or in pain, ease back.
- if your joint feels particularly painful for longer than two hours after an exercise session, reduce the intensity of your next one.
- if an activity causes you pain or increases your pain beyond normal, stop it.
- drink plenty of fluids during and after exercising.
- wear appropriate clothing and footwear.
- increase your incidental activity. For example, walk to nearby shops instead of driving.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Community Health Centre
- Musculoskeletal Australia  
[www.msk.org.au](http://www.msk.org.au)  
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

### How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line on 1800 263 265 to speak to our nurses or email [helpline@msk.org.au](mailto:helpline@msk.org.au)

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- how to live well with these
- managing pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

### More to explore

- Australian Physiotherapy Association  
[www.physiotherapy.asn.au](http://www.physiotherapy.asn.au)
- Exercise and Sports Science Australia (ESSA)  
[www.essa.org.au](http://www.essa.org.au)
- Better Health Channel  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

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