

# Being Active When You Have Rheumatoid Arthritis

Exercise is Medicine®

AMERICAN COLLEGE of SPORTS MEDICINE®

Being active will help you feel better, move better and sleep better. Inactive people who start moving get the biggest bang for their buck. Experts now say that any physical activity counts toward better health — even just a few minutes!

If you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis (RA), an autoimmune disease that causes inflammation of the joints, being active is an important way to improve your RA symptoms. Increasing physical activity decreases tiredness, joint pain, stiffness and inflammation. If you avoid physical activity, you'll just get weaker and stiffer, making your arthritis worse. Regular exercise is not harmful to your joints and lowers your risk of other health problems, such as heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes. Physical activity is recommended and safe, even for those with active RA.

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

## Getting Started

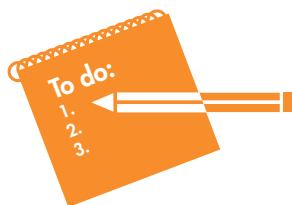
### Talk with Your Rheumatologist

If your RA is active or newly diagnosed, talk with your arthritis specialist about changing medications to reduce inflammation. Check with your health care provider if you have other health problems or have been inactive for a long time.



### Build A Plan

There is no one best way to be active with RA. Use your “likes” to guide your active lifestyle. What will help you make a change and get moving? Physical therapists can teach you exercises and techniques to strengthen and support your joints to reduce pain and injuries.



### Keep It Simple

Sit less and move around more! Sitting still for too long will cause your joints to feel stiff. Walk to the mailbox. Walk the dog. Dance in the kitchen. Take the stairs. Find opportunities to move throughout your day.



### Be Active with a Friend

Find a friend and set up a walking schedule or find out about programs in your community. Start slowly. Those who are active with a buddy tend to stick with it longer than those who go it alone.



## Rheumatoid Arthritis Tips and Cautions

Flares of joint pain, stiffness and swelling are common in RA. If you have an RA flare-up, do not stop all activity. Keep doing gentle joint movements and light exercise.

Talk with your rheumatologist about medications to reduce inflammation. When your RA is better controlled, start physical activities at a level slightly below what you were doing prior to the flare-up.

Try to be active when pain levels and stiffness are lowest, such as late afternoon. Avoid morning stiffness. Increase your activity time or speed by no more than 10% each week.

RA commonly affects the small joints of the wrists, hands, feet and ankles. Make the adjustments suggested below to help activity work best.

You may have some discomfort with exercise, but that doesn't mean you're damaging your joints. If your pain and fatigue are worse in the days following an activity, go easier or shorter next time. Find a program that works for you!

## Aerobic Activity



Aerobic activity increases your heart rate and breathing and improves your energy. Build up to doing at least 150 minutes/week of moderate-intensity activity, 75 minutes of vigorous activity or a combination of both. Try low-impact options such as walking, cycling, elliptical training, rowing or exercising in a pool.

### What?

Any continuous, rhythmic activity with low joint stress



### How often?

3 to 5 days/week



### How hard?

Start fairly light. Build up to somewhat hard.



### How much?

Begin w/ a few minutes. Gradually build up to 30 or more minutes over the day.



**Remember:** Set goals by time rather than distance. Fit in 5 or 10 minutes here and there. Or go for 20 to 30 minutes. Be active however and wherever you can. Eating healthy food and getting at least 7 to 8 hours of quality sleep per night are essential to muscle and joint recovery.

## Aerobic Activity Tips and Cautions

- A few short sessions may be easier on your joints than one long session. Reduce joint stress by doing different types of aerobic activity in the same session or over the week.
- Warm up and cool down at an easy pace for 5 to 10 minutes to ease your joints in and out of more vigorous exercise.
- Plan your activities by how active your RA is. If your RA is well controlled, try weight-bearing activities such as walking or aerobics. For walking (on land or in water), wear shoes that have good support and absorb shock. Start slowly!
- If you have moderate joint pain and swelling, try types of activity that reduce the load on your legs and feet, such as the bike, elliptical trainer, rower or a warm water pool.

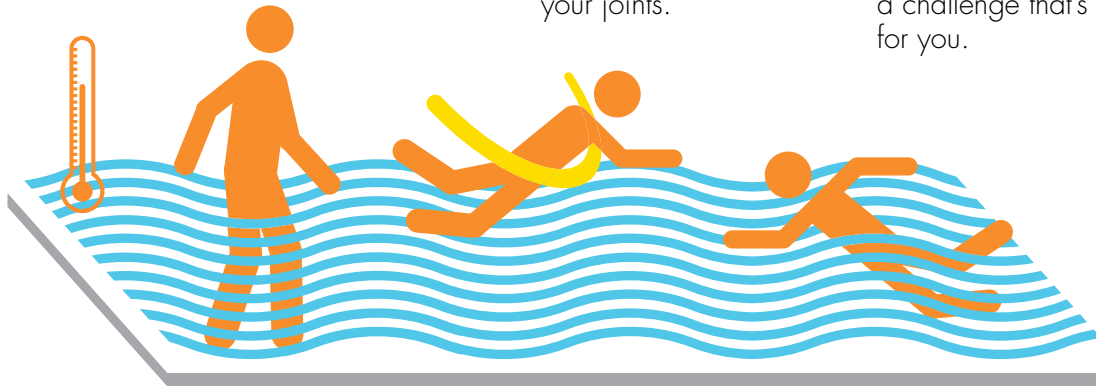
# Water Exercise – Feels Good and Good for You!

If you have severe joint pain and swelling, try being active in a pool (walking, water aerobics or swimming). Find a pool where the water is kept between 88°- 96°F (32°- 35.5°C).

Walk with good posture (stand tall) in shallow warm water to build stamina, coordination, balance and lower body strength. Any small amount of physical activity can help!

As water depth increases, joint loads decrease. For severe arthritis, consider gentle movement in deep water while riding a noodle or wearing a flotation belt to lighten the load on your joints.

Water exercise is a great way to use the natural resistance of water to strengthen your muscles. Push and pull with your hands. Do squats and kicks. Move at the right speed to feel a challenge that's good for you.



## Strength Training



Strength training is an important part of an activity program for those with RA. Strength training helps reverse a severe form of muscle loss, called sarcopenia, that occurs with RA. Increasing strength can decrease joint pain and improve your ability to do daily activities.

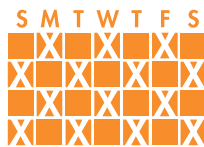
### What?

Hand weights, resistance bands, weight machines or your own body (for example, wall push-ups or sit-to-stands).



### How often?

2 to 3 days/week.  
\*Rest day rest in between.



### How hard?

Start with light effort. Build up to medium or hard effort. You should not feel pain.



### How much?

10 to 15 repetitions to start (for each major muscle group). Perform 2 to 3 times. Once you can do 15 repetitions 3 times, increase weight 5%-10%.



**Remember:** If you need it, get help from a physical therapist or certified exercise professional. They can teach you the right way to do exercises and how to breathe properly.

## Strength Training Tips and Cautions

If you have pain during an exercise, lower the resistance, use a different position or grip, do fewer repetitions, or try a different exercise. Resistance bands or machines might cause less stress on your hands and wrists.

Some parts of an exercise may be more or less comfortable as you move. To start, move in the ranges that are more comfortable. Gradually add more range as your pain lessens and you get stronger.

Hand and wrist braces can help support you during upper body strengthening exercises. An occupational therapist can guide you through a targeted program for those with hand and wrist arthritis.

# Flexibility



RA can significantly limit your flexibility, so exercises to keep your joints moving properly are important. There are two kinds of flexibility exercises: static stretching and moving a joint through its full range of motion (ROM) as much as you can; such as wrist and ankle circles. Moving your joints gives them important nutrition — motion is the lotion of a joint!

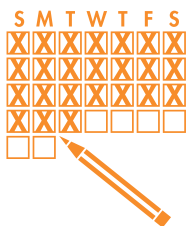
## What?

Range of motion (ROM) exercises and stretching



## How often?

Daily and during cool down



## How hard?

Gently move your joints around as much as you can. Stretch to the point of feeling tightness, but not pain.



## How much?

10 repetitions of active ROM exercises for your affected joints. Hold static stretches for 10-30 seconds (30-60 seconds for older adults).



**Remember:** When your RA is moderately to severely active, focus on light stretches and range of motion exercises.

# Other Ideas for Physical Activity and Health



## Yoga, Tai Chi and Pilates

All help improve strength, flexibility and balance. They also help you relax and reduce pain.



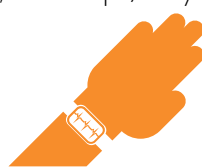
## Balance

Practice simple balance exercises. Stand with your feet together. Stand heel-to-toe. Stand on a softer surface. Hold each position for 15-30 seconds. Walk on a line or on your toes. Use a stable surface or wall for support.



## Take More Steps

Use a smart phone or activity tracker to measure your progress and stay motivated. Slowly build to 2,000 more daily steps than you're doing now. Good job! Then aim for at least 7,000-9,000 steps/day.



## Just for Fun

Find ways of being active that are just plain fun. Dance. Tend your garden. Play outdoors with your kids or grandkids. Find what makes you smile and do it often.



## Get More Help

Arthritis Foundation: [arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/exercise/](https://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/exercise/) for updated guidance, more comprehensive exercise examples and nutrition information.

Go to [acsm.org/get-stay-certified/find-a-pro](https://www.acsm.org/get-stay-certified/find-a-pro) to find **an ACSM certified exercise professional** near you.

How will I get started **this week?** \_\_\_\_\_