Living with RA Doesn’t Have to Mean Staying Away from Enjoyable Exercise

by EFFIE KOLIOPOULOS

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Exercise: What to Consider

When many people hear the term arthritis, they may associate it with pain, inflammation, lack of mobility and movement. While these definitions are true, lack of movement is not always the case. In fact, for some people, rheumatoid arthritis and exercise can pose many benefits.

It can be hard for those living with any type of arthritis, especially rheumatoid arthritis, to move a part of their body in its full range of motion if there is pain and inflammation. Despite this, movement is still a key element in disease management.

Exercising with rheumatoid arthritis has been a topic of discussion for years. The misconceptions that exercising is not good for arthritis has led to many patients not being aware of the positive benefits it can have. For some who find that the physical activities they once loved are no longer as easy, they can fall short with alternative ideas that bring them joy. Others simply give up entirely because they feel they can never get fit or strong again, which is a false perception.

Common Myths About Exercising with RA

Activity Worsens Joint Pain and Inflammation

One of the biggest myths when it comes to exercising and rheumatoid arthritis is that it can worsen joint pain and inflammation. As with any form of exercise, overdoing it and pushing past your known limit can set you back. Aside from conventional medications prescribed to slow the progression of the disease, one of the best complementary and natural treatments one can do for themselves is to exercise.

You Shouldn’t Exercise if You Have Rheumatoid Arthritis

Many people assume this because of the myth addressed above. Rheumatoid arthritis is not just your typical wear and tear arthritis, it has further reaching effects that go beyond muscles, bones and joints. For a small percentage of patients organ involvement can occur in places such as the heart, lungs and eyes. Since people with rheumatoid arthritis are twice as likely to develop heart disease compared to the general population whom do not have the condition, it is especially crucial to exercise for this reason.

Just like the muscles that connect to our bones and joints, the heart is also a muscle that needs to be exercised. This can only be done through physical activity. Exercise can also help the lymphatic system function better by encouraging muscle contractions, pumping fluid all over your body. The lymphatic system is a network of tissues and organs whose primary job is to help the body rid itself of toxins, waste and other unwanted materials. They produce cells that fight viruses, bacteria and disease, along with strengthening the immune system.

Pain Is a Bad Sign

If you have rheumatoid arthritis you may experience pain on and off, or constantly. When working out, trying to differentiate between rheumatoid arthritis pain or exercise pain can be tricky for some.

Typically, pain gives our bodies a sign that something may be wrong or it is a signal to pay attention. Burning discomfort in and around the muscles is a good type of pain. This is a signal that muscles are being worked. However, if you stop a particular exercise and find that you are having pain or discomfort that lasts more than 10 minutes, then that is not a good sign. This is a signal from your body to slow down, take a break, or stop all together.

Exercise Can Cause Joint Damage

Actually, the opposite is true, as no exercise can increase your chances of joint damage. Movement is a natural part of our human evolution and always has been. We are not meant to be sedentary beings and even if you have found yourself needing to be sedentary for a period of time due to surgery recovery or severe flares, that does not mean you cannot begin exercising again once you feel better to do so. Moving your body helps lubricate those creaky and squeaky joints, strengthen muscles and increases flexibility. When your muscles are stronger, they help support your joints better, which then protects you from damage.

People Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis Can Only Do Certain Exercises

Those with RA are all impacted differently. Disease, activity, surgeries and the severity of the condition all come into play when creating an exercise routine. What works for one person, could land another in pain. While low-impact exercises tend to be the norm for all arthritis sufferers, high-impact activities can be beneficial and done safely.

Best Exercises for RA

Stretching

One of the best exercises a person can do that will not require a gym, personal trainer or much effort, is stretching. It’s the number one way to reduce stiffness, especially in the morning or evening when it occurs the most.

Walking

The second-best exercise is walking. This activity can be done almost anywhere and is beneficial for all your organs, joints, bones, muscles and surrounding musculoskeletal tissues, along with your mood.

Yoga, Tai Chi and Pilates

Yoga, tai chi and Pilates are a popular third among rheumatoid arthritis patients. These exercises have been used dating back to ancient times to help people feel more relaxed and alert by the way of deep breathing techniques. The gentle flowing movements and poses aid in strengthening the bones, joints, muscles and improves balance and flexibility.

Swimming

Another gentle exercise that can be beneficial for painful joints is swimming. There are various types of aquatic exercises one can do to reduce stiffness, pain and inflammation. For those who find working out on land more difficult for certain exercises, water provides a natural resistance that takes the pressure off of joints.

This allows for more options when it comes to aerobic or strength-training workouts in the water that can be done with weights for an added benefit. Don’t underestimate water’s gentle nature though. Since it provides a

protective barrier to do workouts with ease, patients may have a tendency to feel better and overdo it. Being mindful while doing water exercises; it is important to help ward off any pain or flares afterwards.

High-Impact Workouts

High-impact workouts provide great benefits for those looking for more aerobic conditioning ideas. Bike riding is an option that reduces your cardiovascular risk by exercising the heart muscle. Weight and strength training can help the bones get stronger, which helps the muscles and joints.

It is good to focus on the smaller picture, by not neglecting the smaller bones and muscles in your body, as seen in the hands and feet. These two areas are usually the first targets of attack in rheumatoid arthritis. Taking the time to exercise these areas by yourself or with a trained medical professional, such as an occupational therapist, can be helpful.

Meeting Your Needs and Goals

Individuals may benefit from having goals that are geared towards lower-impact exercises, while some may need a mixture of low impact and high impact. The overall goal, no matter what form of exercise regime you choose, is to reduce joint pain and maintain and improve joint function.

The important thing to remember, is to not push yourself past your limit. One of the best goals is to try learning what your body likes or does not like, and most importantly, what you enjoy doing. Exercising when looked at as a chore is not fun and can increase a person’s chances of not being motivated or enthusiastic enough to go forward with an exercise plan.

Goals and needs are personal, but a trainer, physical therapist or rheumatologist can help guide you towards where you want to be. The most important thing is to begin. Start slowly and over time your needs and goals will evolve.

Exercise and Disease Management

One of the biggest triggers in developing a chronic disease is lack of exercise. Arthritis is the leading cause of disability in many countries and exercising can lower this risk.

With any exercise you choose to do, it is important to remember to stay hydrated. If you are able, investing in proper shoes and breathable clothing can make you feel more secure, comfortable and confident.

Want to learn more? Check out our tips for exercising with rheumatoid arthritis.