Stretching and RA: Does It Help the Pain?

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Does Stretching Help Arthritis Pain?

Starting an exercising program can be a daunting task for those living with arthritis. Pain, inflammation, and overall joint discomfort may stop someone from doing something as simple as stretching. Automatically you may want to go into protection mode and start fearing that any sort of movement will make things worse. However, stretching can be beneficial during times when arthritis pain strikes. So, does stretching help arthritis pain? Let's find out.

Benefits and Potential Harm

Stretching when done the right way can be beneficial. There are a few basic rules that one should follow to avoid injury. The only time stretching can be harmful is when it is not done properly.
There has long been a debate as to whether stretching is worthwhile or not. The consensus is that, yes, it is worth it. Everyone can benefit from stretching, and people living with arthritis are no exception.

But arthritis can cause lack of range-of-motion in the joints and surrounding structures. This occurs when there has been damage to either the cartilage, nerves, tendons, and muscles.
So, to reap the rewards of stretching make sure to consult with your doctor before trying any stretches and consider following these safety tips.

Warm Up Before You Stretch

This may sound like an extra step you need to take prior to stretching. Though with arthritis, mornings and evenings can be more difficult due to stiffness and soreness. Warming up the muscles can be done in a variety of ways:

- Walking and jogging in place
- Moving your arms in circular motions to bring blood flow to the upper extremities
- Taking a hot shower, warm bath
- Using a heating pad

Static Stretching vs. Dynamic Stretching

There are two main types of stretching. Static stretching is when you maintain a hold. These are best done after warming up. When using the static method, you ideally want to hold the stretch until you feel tension in the muscle area and keep this position for about 15 to 60 seconds. The length of time you hold a stretch also depends on your threshold. If you are just starting out, begin slow and work your way up to holding the stretch a bit longer each time.

Static stretching is known to be the safest way to stretch. It's great for those wanting to establish a simple routine

in the morning, evening or throughout the day. The key thing to remember is that even though results will be felt immediately, consistency is needed to achieve long-term results.

Dynamic stretching is also called active stretching. This type of stretch is best used as a warm-up to prep the body for sports related exercises, and other activities that require the muscles to work harder. Each time a dynamic stretch is completed, it raises the temperature in the muscles by increasing blood flow to the area.

A simple example of an active stretch is fast walking. In doing this, you start out slow then pick up the pace. Athletes who play football, tennis and other high contact sports often use dynamic stretches to warm up before a practice or game. For instance, a tennis player may a set of lunges in various directions and a football player may do high kicks across the field.

You may be wondering how this pertains to arthritis. Well, you do not need to be an athlete to do dynamic stretches. High-intensity activities may not be good for every person living with arthritis due to lack of mobility and joint damage, but you can still find a way to raise your heart rate by doing other activities that are easier on the joints:

- Swimming
- Biking
- Fast walking
- Pilates
- Yoga
- Weightlifting
- Isometric exercises
- Resistance band workouts

Active stretching can be used after any workout to cool down as well. When you stretch after any form of exercise, there can be long-term flexibility benefits. Since your muscles are warmest after working out, these types of stretches done before as a warm-up and after as a cool down, can lessen any soreness and stiffness experienced the next day.

Does Stretching Relieve Arthritis Pain Indefinitely?

The bad news is that arthritis pain may still linger even if you do stretches. But the good news is that over time you are benefiting your body in many ways by doing this simple workout. You are gaining more strength, flexibility and overall increasing your chances for a good outcome. Arthritis is usually a long-term, chronic illness and progressive, meaning it can get worse over time. So, any movement or stretches, are crucial to maintaining your functionality.

There may be times when working out and doing a lot of activities is not doable though. Sometimes when you do a lot, you may even feel worse the next day and need to slow down. Arthritis is very unpredictable and listening to your body is important. Flares can cause an increased level of pain and inflammation but taking the time to do gentle stretches during these bad days can help you feel a bit better.

If you find that stretching on land is too painful, then going into a warm water pool to stretch can be another option. There is less strain on the joints in the water, and it can be easier to do various movements. But caution is needed because you may find yourself overdoing a stretch in the water, that is difficult to do on land. To make sure you are using the correct form in the water, seeking out the guidance of a physical therapist can prove to be highly beneficial.

Which Times Should You Stretch?

Picking a time to stretch every day is a personal choice. Mornings, afternoons, and evenings can be great times. Some people like to stretch in the morning to help with joint stiffness and soreness upon waking, and others like to take a hot shower or warm bath to get the muscles loose before stretching. Others find stretching in the

evening can relieve any arthritis pain that can be experienced throughout the night. Below are some of the best stretches for arthritis that can be done for various parts of the body, at any time that is best for you.

Stretches for Arthritis Pain

You can do these stretches lying in bed, sitting at the edge of your bed, or standing beside it.

Hands, Shoulders, and Chest Stretches

- **Towel squeeze:** Can help pain in the hands. This can be done with a towel or a sponge and repeated 10 to15 times per hand. If you have irreversible joint damage in your hands, always consult an occupational therapist or physical therapist prior to doing this stretch.
- **Shoulder rolls (backwards):** Backward shoulder rolls are often better than forward shoulder rolls. With arthritis it is important to maintain proper posture and sometimes when people have pain in their shoulders, they compensate by slouching them forward or hiking them up towards the chin. For this stretch, stand with your arms straight at your sides, as close to your body as possible. Lift your shoulders up towards your chin, and slowly round them backwards making sure to pay attention to squeeze your scapula gently as you go down.
- **Door or corner stretch:** This can be done easily in the corner of your room, or in a nearby doorway. To begin stand a couple of feet away from your designated spot and place your hands at shoulder height on either side of the wall sections. With your elbows bent 90 degrees, slowly and gently lean your body weight forward. This stretch will be felt across the front of the shoulders and chest, also known as the pectoral muscles.

For an added boost, you can stretch out your calf muscle as well during this stretch.

Simply put one leg back, and the other leg in front of you with that knee slightly bent. When you push forward, the back leg that is in the straight position will feel a slight tension. When stretching the upper extremities, it is always a good idea to do the lower extremities to even things out.

Hips, Knees, and Feet

- **Piriformis stretches:** This can be done sitting in a chair or at the edge of your bed. With one leg down and knee bent at a 90-degree angle, take the other leg, and bend it over the thigh muscle of the other leg. The side of your calf should be resting on that thigh. Your ankle will be inside and the knee pointing outwards, away from your body. You can take your one hand to press the knee of the bent leg and push down with your other hand on your ankle. By doing this you will feel a stretch near the hip, and behind the lower back.
- **Hamstring stretch:** This stretch can help your knees, as the hamstring is the muscle group responsible for bending the knee joint and flexing the hip. To do this, lay on your back with your one knee bent, you can start with either the left or right knee. Lift the other leg into the air, making sure to keep it as straight as possible. Using your hands, pull the bent leg towards your chest and hold for 30 seconds. You can alternate doing this with each leg a few times.
- **Toe spreading: This foot and toe stretch, is called toe splaying.** It’s a very easy stretch to do before even getting out of bed in the morning. However, if you have any damage in your toes or pain, take it slow and talk to your doctor before starting this. Laying down in bed, at the side of the bed or in a chair, spread your toes apart as far as you are able and to your comfort level. When you do this, you will notice a space between each toe. Hold for a few seconds, relax then repeat. You can do this on both feet at the same time, or one at a time. It’s up to you!

Takeaway

Stretching is a personal experience for everyone. Not every stretch will be beneficial for you, so before starting any routine make sure to talk to your doctor. If you live with arthritis, stretching can lubricate the joints and lengthen the muscles, providing greater flexibility overtime. It can help if you are experiencing arthritis pain, but

always use caution and discernment to not overdo it. Stretching modifications are available if you find that one stretch is particularly harder to do.

Consulting with a physical therapist or occupational therapist can be beneficial to receive targeted stretches for your specific needs. There are multiple ways to warm-up and cool-down the joints and muscles. What is most important is to move, no matter what that movement is.