

Yeovil District Hospital



NHS Foundation Trust

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Advice for Home Exercise Programme

**If you have any questions or require further information
or advice, please contact:**

PHYSIOTHERAPY DEPARTMENT

(between 8:30 am and 5 pm)

01935 384358

Physiotherapy Department

HOW TO STRIKE A BALANCE

An arthritis flare has three stages. Your exercise programme needs to be adapted for each stage as detailed below.

During a flare

Joints will be:

- Very painful, even at rest
- Tender to press
- Swollen
- Hot and possibly red
- Difficult to move

1. Assess the state of the joint.
 - If hot, swollen and painful use ice (eg, frozen peas in a damp teatowel) on the affected joint
 - If aching, but not unduly swollen and hot, gentle warmth may help
2. Put affected joints through as full a range of movement as pain allows.
 - Twice in the morning/twice at the end of the day
 - Do not push through the pain, try to ease into a full range of movement
3. Do static muscle work where possible (that is muscle tightening without moving the joint), ie, static gluts/quads and static shoulder work.
4. Be aware of the posture of your joints, especially with joints that tend to develop flexion deformities, ie, hips/knees/elbows/small joints of the hand. Make sure you stretch these joints into their open position.
Never sleep with a pillow under your knees.
5. Joint protection:
 - Wear hand and wrist splints, if appropriate
 - If your flare is in your lower limbs, ease off weight-bearing activities
 - Use a walking aid in the opposite hand

AND FINALLY ... DISPELLING THE MYTHS

“Exercise wears your joints out”

In fact, the reverse is true! Joints that are kept supple and muscles that are kept strong will last a lot longer than those left to rust.

“There’s no gain without pain”

Exercise should not be painful. You may ache a little afterwards, but this should settle in less than half an hour. If it takes longer, you have overdone it – cut down the exercises by half, but don’t stop altogether.

“It doesn’t matter if I don’t do any exercise today – I’ll do twice as much tomorrow to make up for it”

What better way to overdo it and make things ache! A little and often is the key.

“Even if my joints are swollen and painful, I must still do all the exercises – I’m not going to give in to it”

Stop! Listen to what your joints are telling you. If they are acutely flared up they need to rest; take them through their full range just once a day. Don’t give in to arthritis, but respect your joints. Change the exercises to suit the stage of your arthritis.

“I don’t need to exercise, I keep myself fit doing housework”

Housework, no matter how tiring, does not count as exercise. The object of exercise is to take the joints through a full range of movement, or specific strengthening which housework doesn’t do.

“These exercises aren’t working. I’ve been doing them for a month and I still don’t feel any different”

Don’t worry. It can take 8-12 weeks before you start to feel stronger and more supple. Don’t give up. Muscle takes up to 3 months to change.

“I must keep exercising all day or my joints will freeze up”

Actually, you need to strike a balance between rest and exercise. This can be difficult as your arthritis will vary from day to day. Don’t worry if you find it hard to strike a happy medium – even those who have lived with arthritis for a long time get it wrong occasionally.

**IT IS BETTER TO DO A LITTLE TOO OFTEN
THAN A LOT TOO LITTLE!**

HOW TO LOOK AFTER YOUR JOINTS (See the ARC booklet)

Hands and Wrists

- Use two hands instead of one when lifting
- Use the forearm to help lifting and pulling
- Avoid heavy lifting
- Avoid gripping things tightly for long periods
- Use the palm of the hand and side of the hand to lift rather than the fingers
- Use lightweight bags, and clothing that is simple to get in and out of

- Ladies keep your handbag as light as possible

Hips and Knees

- Adjust the height of the bed, chair, toilet and other furniture so that they are easy to get in and out of
- Ask your occupational therapist for advice if you are not sure, or need blocks to increase the height of furniture

Feet

- Use firm lightweight shoes with enough room for your feet

Once a Flare Has Started to Subside

Joints will be:

- Less painful
- Less difficult to move
- Less swollen and hot

Start to increase activity.

1. Your joints are no longer swollen and hot, gentle heat when exercising may help if discomfort is still experienced
2. Put joints through as full a range of movement as pain allows, several times a day
3. Perform postural exercises – ‘Sit Tall’, ‘Walk Tall’, ‘Be Tall’.
4. Increase the number of stretching exercises
5. Continue to wear hand splints at night, if appropriate
6. Gradually increase mobility. Decrease use of walking aids if possible. Only discard these if a reasonable gait pattern can be achieved with no pain

When a Flare has Subsided/Resolved

Joints will:

- Be minimally painful and easier to move
- They may ache following activities
- Weak due to general muscle weakness
- Heat may still be helpful

Continue to put your joints through full range of movement several times a day. It is better to do things ‘little and often’ with frequent short rests, instead of exercising or keeping active until you become exhausted or severe pain develops.

Limit activities which give you increased pain for longer than 30 minutes, but start to get things going again.

Always be aware of your posture. Aim for symmetry in your home and work environments – keep a good upright posture, lead from your chest with your head held high and your tummy tucked in.

THE PRINCIPLES OF EXERCISE

Why Should I Exercise?

- To strengthen muscles
- To maintain range of movement
- Exercise provides good joint nutrition, increasing the arterial supply to capsule, ligaments and muscles
- Exercise prevents loss of function

Muscles around the inflamed joints can quickly become weak and wasted if not exercised. The joints themselves become stiff and less mobile and sometimes deformity can develop. Simple exercises may help to limit each of these problems.

When Should I Exercise?

2-3 times per day when

- You have least pain and stiffness
- You are not tired
- Medication is having its maximum effect

How Should I Exercise?

- Begin with a low number of repetitions of a few exercise
- Start within a comfortable range of movement
- Slowly increase to full range movements
- Try to keep movements relaxed and gentle to minimise stress on joints

When Have I Done Too Much?

- Listen to your joints, nudge don't pain
- If any increased discomfort lasts for more than 20 minutes after exercise, let the discomfort settle and next time do half the exercises.

THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL EXERCISE PROGRAMME

1. Maintain a balance between rest and exercise
2. Exercise correctly, carefully and with control
3. Build up your exercises gradually
4. Expect **setbacks** in any exercise programme

TYPES OF EXERCISE

Ideally an exercise programme should include all three of the following exercise groups.

Stretching Exercises

These are designed to increase and maintain joint mobility. They are done by moving and stretching the joint as far as it will go comfortably and then coax it a little further. Hold the stretch for 3-5 seconds then gently release the pressure, repeat each stretch 3-5 times.

Strengthening Exercises

These increase muscle strength and protect vulnerable joints. They are done in such a way as to minimise stress on joints. Some exercises are isometric, involving the use of muscle(s) without movement at the joint.

Strengthening exercises are not a substitute for **stretching** exercises. They will not increase joint range of motion.

Endurance Exercises

These are necessary as neither stretching nor strengthening exercises will increase endurance, eg, the length of time you can walk, swim or cycle. Decrease stress on your joints by wearing low-heeled, rubber-soled, lightweight shoes.

If you require specific guidance on developing an exercise programme, please ask your physiotherapist.