
Exercise and Osteoarthritis of the Knee

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the leading cause of disability among adults. The condition causes joint pain, swelling, and eventually loss of function in the affected joint. It commonly affects the knees and hips, but other joints can also be affected. OA is caused, in part, by the gradual wear and tear on the joints, which has created some apprehension about possible negative effects of exercise on affected joints.

A 2005 study published in *Arthritis & Rheumatism* is helping to dispel the myth that exercise may aggravate cartilage loss and increase the wear and tear associated with OA. In the study, researchers determined that, rather than damaging knee joint cartilage, moderate exercise actually strengthened joint cartilage and reduced pain in people with early symptoms of OA of the knee. Numerous other studies have also concluded that exercise helps to improve pain, stiffness and functional ability in patients with OA of the knee.

So, what kind of exercise should you do if you have OA of the knee?

Aerobic Exercise:

Aerobic exercise has a double benefit for people with OA of the knee: strengthening and weight loss. Low-impact aerobic exercise, such as stationary bicycling, can help to maintain normal movement and strengthen the supporting structures of the knee.

Excess weight is a risk factor for developing OA, and is associated with progression of the disease and disability. However, pain and disability associated with OA can make it difficult to exercise sufficiently to lose weight. One excellent mode of exercise for those with OA is aquatic exercise. Both swimming and water walking have been found to be just as effective as land-based activities for weight loss, when done at a sufficient intensity.

Strength Exercise:

Gentle, closed-chain exercises designed to strengthen the legs and hips have been shown to have a positive effect on the pain and stiffness associated with OA of the knee.

Flexibility Exercise:

Flexibility of the hamstrings (back of the thigh), quadriceps (front of the thigh), calves and hips are crucial to maintaining knee health. Tension in the muscles surrounding the knee joint can cause pain and incorrect movement patterns.

Although the thought of exercise can be daunting when you are experiencing the joint pain associated with osteoarthritis of the knee, exercise can actually have a strong positive effect on pain, stiffness and function. If you've been diagnosed with OA of the knee, talk to your doctor or physical therapist about starting an exercise program, and work with a certified trainer to design an appropriate program.

look, feel, be better!

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