

# GETTING ACTIVE

**Andrew Harding** shows how to get started on being more active

**Y**ou can start to become more active even before you get out of bed each morning. This can be a good time to gently loosen stiff joints and muscles and set the tone for the day. 'I do stretching exercises in bed because I get leg cramps and very stiff arms and feet,' says Angie Leach, 64, who has osteoarthritis, inflammatory arthritis and fibromyalgia. 'I reassure people that the right sort of exercise really improves the use of a joint if pain is managed properly,' says Rob Hicks, a GP. 'If you don't like the thought of exercise, then just think of it as being a bit more active.'

## GETTING STARTED

'When I developed arthritis I went to a physiotherapist and I still do the arm and shoulder exercises, especially when watching TV,' says Angie. 'I used to be a very active person but now get very tired and have to take frequent rests, but doing things slowly

and gently is much better than nothing. Housework and chores help to keep me moving and on my feet. Five minutes a time during the day is what I can manage – especially during flare-ups.'

Speak to your GP and get a referral to a physiotherapist who can choose specific exercises for you. 'People sometimes look at me in disbelief when I suggest that being more active will help, especially if they have tried to do exercise and had to stop because of pain,' says Dr Hicks. 'But I help to get their pain under control and then help each person to set some simple goals – something they would really love to be able to do.'

There are three basic forms of exercise – muscle strengthening, range of movement and cardiovascular. Many everyday activities combine these naturally, like walking or climbing stairs, but there are specific exercises to strengthen and stretch particular muscles and joints. See Arthritis



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Care's booklet *Exercise and Arthritis* for ideas: [www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Booklets](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Booklets)

It is easy to do too much, especially at first. Three years ago, Gareth Davies, 43, who has rheumatoid arthritis (RA), decided he had to improve his fitness. 'I couldn't get out of a chair without someone to help me,' he says. 'When I started to exercise I tried to do far too much with weights and an exercise bike. I would be exhausted for days so I had to lower my expectations a lot. Then a physiotherapist gave me some exercises I could do to begin strengthening my muscles while lying down. I stopped before I was too tired and each week I was able to do a bit more.'



**A physiotherapist can teach you how to increase your mobility safely**




After three weeks I started to notice very small things – that my legs felt a bit looser and it was a bit easier to walk,’ says Gareth.

Done in the right way, the right exercises can help to protect your joints and give you more energy. According to Jenny Ratcliffe, a physiotherapist, the warning signs from overusing a joint are different from natural tiredness and muscle soreness after exercising. ‘Persistent pain or swelling in a joint, a feeling of something being out of joint, or pain in the joint that comes later after exercise are signs that you may be putting too much pressure on a joint,’ she says.

Finding out what help and support is



available in your area is a big part of getting started. ‘Ask your GP if the exercise prescription scheme is available in your area, where you can go to a leisure centre or gym for reduced cost,’ says Dr Hicks. Rosemary McGarry, 61, has OA and helps to run Arthritis Care workshops and events. ‘It can be a big thing to go and find out what’s available, especially if others have been doing things for you,’ she says. ‘But it’s well worth finding out what’s available at your local leisure centre. Because I am over 60, I can use my local centre for free before 11am. I found the staff very helpful in finding the right sort of  p12

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exercise and level for me. I know it's harder if you live in a rural area so ask what transport is available to help you get to a town. Local charities sometimes provide it.'

## **BUILDING UP**

'When I developed OA I had to start again with exercise – very slowly and then build up. Most mornings I go for a walk – if not, I'm stiff by lunchtime,' says Rosemary. 'Last year I couldn't do anything for two months and had to slowly build up again. I now go swimming once a week and that's excellent because the water supports my body so there is no pressure on my joints. Aqua aerobics is excellent too.'

By starting slowly and gradually exercising for longer and more intensely you can develop your strength and fitness safely. A good time to stop is when you feel that you could still do a little bit more. Pain is a warning sign but some muscle tiredness after exercising is good. 'Your goal should be to understand what might be too much for you and how your own body reacts,' says physio Jenny. 'Your body can be pushed within your limits, but this must be done with care to allow your strength and balance to improve. As long as you do not feel pain, if you exercise until your muscles start to shake a bit, they will strengthen.'



**Using a personal trainer, or asking gym instructors for guidance, can be a good way to gently ease your way into an exercise programme and over the long-term a good way of achieving your goals.**

Getting into a routine is essential for building up strength, flexibility and fitness. 'I started going to the gym with my wife,' says Gordon Millar, 34, who has ankylosing spondylitis. 'Being able to encourage each other has been good for getting into a routine.' An important part of that routine was being able to ask the instructors at the gym for guidance. 'They showed me how to set the machines to give the right amount of resistance for me, and I went from there. There's always a trainer there who can point me in the right direction when I want to increase the

intensity of my workout or try new things.'

Try exercising for a few minutes at a time if you can't do a longer session. 'Don't try to push as hard as you can,' says physio Jenny. 'Whatever your level of ability, you can work on your breathing to get plenty of oxygen into your body. Breathe in deeply while counting slowly to four, rest for four, then breath out for four, pause for four and breathe in again.'

## KEEPING FIT

Understanding what motivates you is very helpful – be it reporting to an instructor, being part of a class, walking with your spouse or doing something at your own pace. 'What really motivated me at first was my next appointment with the physiotherapist and knowing I would be letting them down if I hadn't done enough,' Gareth says.

To keep motivated, find a type of exercise that you enjoy. Knowing it is helping you can also be satisfying even if it is a bit boring at times. Take the exercise bike, for example. Rosemary uses an exercise bike at a gym. 'My consultant told me I would soon need a knee replacement so I asked what I could do to put it off as long as possible. She advised me to use an exercise bike to support and strengthen my knees, which I do once a week or so. I do 20 minutes on the bike, some exercises to strengthen my back and abdomen, then another 20 minutes on the bike. Breaking it up is good and so far my knees are doing well.' But for Gordon it is rather boring, although good for cardiovascular fitness. 'I try to deal with the boredom factor by watching TV at the gym. Working out gives me more energy to deal with any aches and discomfort, which tend to be less severe when I am working out. Feeling brighter and more positive also helps with any residual aches and stiffness,' he says.

Building up your strength is vital when preparing for surgery. 'After my last hip replacement I was able to walk a bit after two days and had a much quicker recovery. There was no way I could ever have done that before,' says Gareth.

The benefits are not only physical. 'When a friend who I had not seen for 13 years saw me get up from a chair by myself he was speechless with amazement,' says Gareth. 'Those moments make it all worthwhile and motivate me like nothing else.'

Gyms and leisure centres can be good places to try a variety of exercises. Walking, cycling with both legs and arms, swimming and rowing are just some examples. Simple equipment at home will also give you a



During Arthritis Care Week, 9-15 May 2011, there will be a chance to enjoy a gentle walk at events organised across the UK by Arthritis Care. Called Amble for Arthritis, anyone with arthritis and their friends and family can go to an Amble event and join in at their own pace. You will be able to get out to a beautiful part of your area for an enjoyable day out and help to raise awareness and vital funds for Arthritis Care.

If you are interested in taking part in an Amble call supporter services on 020 7380 6540 or your local Arthritis Care office (see page 40 for details), or visit [www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

### Arthritis Care supporter Rosemary McGarry tells her story:

'I am helping to organise an Amble along a beautiful stretch of river and towpath in Belfast. We really want to encourage people with arthritis who think they are unable to leave home to come along and have a good day out in the fresh air meeting other people. I know many people couldn't get over how much they enjoyed the day last year. We make sure that everyone who wants to participate can do so. All the paths are straight and level, thus suitable for wheelchair users. I say to people that if you can walk around your house then you can probably manage a short amble and the shortest walk is just under half a mile. The longest is about four miles. All the walks are well organised with Arthritis Care volunteers there to make sure everybody is OK. You can take as much time as you need to admire the scenery and to rest because there is no time pressure.'

much wider range of exercises to do and help to make them more effective. Long rubber bands known as resistance bands or therabands are very good for this. A balancing ball will help you to build up strength from your neck to your hips. A variety of activities will be more interesting and give you alternatives when you are tired or having a flare-up. 'Weight training is especially helpful for my upper body and back, although during flares I ease back on the weights and do more swimming,' says Gordon. Likewise, Gareth rests in the morning when he has a busy day ahead. 'Then I aim to exercise on a day that will be less busy.'

You could try the Wii computer package. 'The fitness programme is fun as long as

you realise it's intended for someone who is not disabled and you don't try to do everything,' says Gareth. 'Moving along with the avatar character doing the exercises makes me feel like I am involved in something rather than struggling by myself.'

Little and often is the golden rule for staying active. If you find yourself thinking that you haven't done enough, try looking at it this way. 'When you do just two or three minutes of something at a time, tell yourself you have done well, and that you will do more later. Even if it is a minute or two – that is OK,' says Dr Hicks. 'There is no doubt in my mind that people who develop a positive attitude to what they can do, will do a lot better and be happier.' 