

Strengthening aching joints. The dilemma of people living with osteoarthritis.

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Physical activity is vital for good health and is prescribed by healthcare professionals to treat various chronic health conditions, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and osteoarthritis. People with osteoarthritis and other types of arthritis have long been encouraged to participate in regular physical activity. Today, exercise, particularly strength training, is recommended worldwide as a key treatment for people with painful joints. Strength training consists of exercise that uses resistance, such as the person's body weight, elastic bands, or weights to strengthen muscles around an aching joint.

While being active sounds like something we all should be doing, many people find it challenging to follow this advice because of aching joints and fear that exercise may further harm their "bone on bone" joints. Not surprisingly, osteoarthritis is commonly misunderstood as an irreversible joint disease made worse by using the joint and can only be 'fixed' by replacing the joint. *"If the bone's worn, the pain will be there. The only thing to do is to cut it away"*.

People's beliefs about their joints can significantly impact how they use them. For example, the belief that osteoarthritis is caused by 'wear and tear' can result in concerns that weight-bearing activities, mainly exercises with resistance, will increase joint damage and pain. *"I've been told I need to exercise, but wouldn't that wear the cartilage away even more?"*

Contrary to popular beliefs, exercise has been shown to reduce inflammation and improve joint health. These scientific findings indicate that exercise is safe and necessary for people with osteoarthritis. The challenge, however, is understanding how one can exercise a painful joint - *"if I can't walk down the street without pain...how am I supposed to lift weights?"*

It is essential to understand that people who exercise to treat joint pain are likely to experience



a slight, temporary increase in pain. This is not usually a sign of harm; instead, it is a sign that the joint is responding to exercise; and given time and a sensible progression, the joint will adapt and become more tolerable to load. In fact, research shows that graduated exercise can result in pain relief similar to that provided by off-the-shelf medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. In addition, in many cases of people with osteoarthritis waiting for joint surgery, exercise can reduce symptoms enough that surgery is put on hold.

Nonetheless, it is not all about having strong muscles! Joint pain is influenced by multiple factors (physical, psychological, and social). A healthcare professional's role is to help patients build a whole-health understanding of their condition, adopt a healthier lifestyle, develop the confidence to engage in strengthening exercises, and actively manage flare-ups. This active approach is also beneficial for people who still need surgery, as it can positively influence post-surgical outcomes and satisfaction.