

Rheumatoid arthritis



What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disorder that can impact different body systems and structures including the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and blood vessels. Unlike osteoarthritis, RA is usually symmetrical in clinical presentation affecting joints on both sides of your body at the same time.

How does exercise help with rheumatoid arthritis?

Exercise is one of the most effective and potent treatments for addressing these issues, as recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine guidelines. Physical activity provides numerous benefits by improving your joint health, mobility, psychological well-being and fatigue through improvements in muscle strength and oxygen capacity, leading to reductions in inflammatory mediators. When undertaking physical activity, it is important to consider and discuss what will work best for you in a time-efficient, goal-orientated, self-efficacious and individualised exercise prescription.

Accredited Exercise Physiologists are integral to help you manage your rheumatoid arthritis, whilst also considering your quality of life, activities of daily living, physical function and lifestyle management. Your GP and health professionals will also discuss a range of comorbidities that you may present with, and work with you to consider exercise as another form of medicine. The current Australian physical activity recommendations suggest that you should aim to complete 150 min/week of moderate intensity exercise or 75 min of vigorous exercise with two days of resistance-based activities per week.

What type of exercise is best for rheumatoid arthritis?

Resistance Exercise

Resistance based exercise is a safe and effective way to improve your muscle strength and physical function. Resistance training has been shown to reduce disability, inflammation and cardiovascular risk factors. Exercises should target large muscle groups to improve overall body function and can be undertaken using bands, body weight or weights/machines. Starting at a light intensity is important for the body to become accustomed to exercise and will assist in technique proficiency.

Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise when undertaken at a sufficient dosage to achieve health-enhancing effects may elicit beneficial adaptations to your cardiovascular and metabolic systems. Aerobic exercise may also offer protection against common comorbidities such as hypertension and obesity. Aerobic exercise in the forms of cycling, walking, cross-trainer, and rowing are excellent ways to reduce cardiovascular risk factors. Aerobic exercise is safe and can improve measures of disability when undertaken on a frequent and consistent basis, e.g. 30 minutes on most days of the week.

Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy when undertaken as adjunctive therapy to medication, has been shown to reduce inflammatory markers compared to medication alone. Hydrotherapy at a moderate intensity can provide cardiovascular improvements with the weightlessness minimising load on the joints. Hydrotherapy should be undertaken in conjunction with a resistance training program to improve muscle and bone health.

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Always seek professional advice from an Accredited Exercise Physiologist. Find one here: www.essa.org.au/find-aep