



Water exercise

Your questions answered

Q. Why is exercise important?

A. It can be hard to move when your muscles and joints are stiff or painful, but [regular exercise](#) is essential for managing musculoskeletal conditions. It helps reduce pain and stiffness, and improves joint mobility and strength. It can also improve balance and [sleep quality](#), lower stress levels, improve mood and help you maintain a healthy weight.

But when you're in pain, exercise can feel like the last thing you want to do. Exercising in the water may be an option.

Q. What is water exercise?

A. Any exercise you do in the water qualifies as water exercise. The simple act of moving your body against water resistance will strengthen your muscles.

However, to get the best outcomes for your musculoskeletal condition, you need a range of exercises that work your joints and muscles. This may involve anything from walking in the water to water aerobics.

Water exercise is usually done in a heated pool. It may also be called *water* therapy, aqua therapy, aquatic therapy or hydrotherapy.

Q. How will exercising in water help?

A. Warm water exercise is beneficial if you have arthritis or a musculoskeletal condition because:

- the warmth of the water is soothing and helps relieve pain and stiffness
- the buoyancy supports your body and lessens the strain on your joints
- water resistance enables you to build up flexibility, strength and stamina gradually
- anyone can do it – no matter your age or level of fitness.

Q. Are there different ways to exercise in water?

A. Yes. There are several ways you can exercise in water. The most suitable type of water exercise for you depends on the type of arthritis you have and how it affects you, your fitness level, confidence in the water, and your personal preferences and interests.

Water exercise classes

You can enjoy the fun, motivation and social interaction of exercising with others in a class that suits your capabilities and fitness level. In these classes, all participants follow the same general exercises.



Many recreation and fitness centres run water exercise classes and cater to various abilities and fitness levels. Contact your local centre and talk with an instructor to find out what's available and discuss your exercise goals. And ask if you can visit the centre and observe a class before you sign up to be sure it's the right fit for you.

Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy is specialised exercise therapy run by a [health professional](#) such as a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist in a specially heated warm water pool. Exercises are personalised to you and your specific needs. You can do hydrotherapy one-on-one with the health professional or in a small group.

Doing your own thing

You can do your own water exercises in a warm water pool at home or in recreation centres, fitness clubs, swimming schools and retirement villages.

Here are some tips for getting started with your program:

- If you're not sure what exercises to do, talk with a qualified instructor or health professional. We've also included links to some general exercises in the ***More to Explore*** section below.
- Choose a time when the pool is fairly quiet so you can move safely and confidently around the pool area. You're also less likely to be bumped by enthusiastic swimmers and others enjoying more boisterous water activities.
- Check the ease and safety of access into the centre, dressing area, pool and car park.

Swimming is also a good form of water exercise you can do on your own, and it's excellent for your heart and lungs.

Q. What if I can't swim?

A. If you can't swim, that's ok. Water exercise classes take place in water that's about chest height. You can also use flotation devices to give you the confidence to move in water if you feel apprehensive.

Q. Are there any other things I should know before starting water exercise?

A. If you've just been diagnosed with a musculoskeletal condition or haven't been active for a while, you might not know where to start with an exercise program. Here are some tips for getting started and staying safe:

Check with your doctor or rheumatologist before starting a water exercise program. If you've had joint surgery, find out when you can safely go back into the water. This is usually after the surgical wound has healed. Also, find out from your surgeon if there are movements you should limit or avoid.

See a physio or exercise physiologist for advice about specific exercises if possible. They can suggest safe exercises tailored for you and ensure you're doing them correctly so you don't cause an injury.

Don't go into the water if you're sick, have any wounds, skin irritations or infections.

Check out the venue to see if it's suitable for you. For example, is the pool easy to access? Are the change rooms accessible and comfortable? Is the venue close enough for you to go to regularly? Do the class times and opening hours of the venue work for you? Is it easy to access the facility from the car park?

Begin your exercise program with short sessions and gradually build up over time.

Perform each movement as gracefully and smoothly as you can.

Keep the body part you're exercising under the water. This may require you to squat or bob down at times.



Come out of the water immediately if you feel light-headed, dizzy, drowsy, extremely fatigued or unwell. These reactions are possible if you spend too long in very warm water. Drink some water and sit or lie down for a while.

Stop doing any exercise that causes severe pain or discomfort. Consult your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist if your joint symptoms increase significantly after an exercise session.

Ease up if you experience mild to moderate joint or muscle pain for more than a few hours after your exercise session. Some increased pain is normal after exercise, especially when you're starting out, but if you're in pain hours after you visit the pool, you've likely overdone it. Reduce the intensity next time - but don't stop.

Consider wearing water shoes if you're slipping and sliding in the pool. They'll give you some grip to help you keep your balance.

After a water exercise session, drink water to replace the fluid you've lost through sweat.

Take care when moving in wet areas around the pool, including change rooms, to avoid slips and falls.

Rest afterwards if you feel tired. Exercising in warm water can be draining, especially when you're starting out.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [exercise physiologist](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, exercise, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [A joint-friendly water workout for psoriatic arthritis](#)
HealthCentral
- [Hit the pool to relieve joint pain](#)
Arthritis Foundation (USA)
- [Hydrotherapy](#)
Versus Arthritis (UK)
- [Water therapy and arthritis](#)
Arthritis Society (Canada)
- [Water-based exercise for knee and hip osteoarthritis](#)
The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners

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