



Swimming with musculoskeletal conditions

This fact sheet explains how you are able to participate in swimming and other disciplines, if you have a musculoskeletal (MSK) condition such as arthritis or back pain.

Introduction

Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions are those that affect the muscles, bones, joints or nerves. They include specific conditions such as osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, but also some very common problems such as back, neck or shoulder pain.

Over 20 million people in the UK live with arthritis and other MSK conditions. Symptoms can vary considerably from day to day and may affect multiple joints or just one. Some types of arthritis can be linked to other conditions as well – for example, psoriatic arthritis and the skin condition psoriasis.

If someone is experiencing pain in their muscles, joints or bones it can be very tempting to rest. Many people fear that exercise might increase 'wear and tear' to their joints. But joints and muscles are designed for movement and are very good at repairing themselves.

Although a short period of rest may be beneficial if someone's pain is related to a particular injury or strain, too much rest can actually make things worse in the longer term, as the muscles start to weaken. This can lead to further pain when they do try to become active again.

Keeping active is the best way of keeping someone's joints and muscles healthy, as well as being good for their general health. Losing weight through exercise can help reduce the load on weight-bearing joints.

Some of the benefits of exercise in water for MSK conditions

Exercising in water is often recommended for people with arthritis and other MSK conditions, for a number of reasons:

- The water helps to support the weight of the body, reducing strain on painful joints.
- Water provides a degree of resistance for people to work against, which can help to strengthen their muscles.
- Movements in water are easy to adapt if someone has a disability.
- There are also benefits to conditions that are sometimes associated with MSK conditions such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Swimming is an excellent form of exercise for people with musculoskeletal conditions, as it will take some of their joints through their full range of motion in a way that sometimes might be difficult or painful out of the water.

What other aquatic activity options are there?

In addition to swimming, there are many other aquatic exercise and activity options. Importantly, many pool activities like aqua aerobics or even aqua walking (walking lengths in a pool) can be completed in the shallow end of the pool.

Below are some activities people may find on offer at their local pool or that they could complete in the pool:

Aqua Aerobics: group classes of exercise and movements in the pool, often to music, with an instructor leading the class.

Aqua Walking: walking around the pool with the water resistance requiring more effort to walk than on land.

Water Wellbeing: instructors who have achieved the 'Aquatic Activity for Health' qualification providing 1-2-1 or small group water-based activities tailored for people living with health conditions.

Good Boost: personalised aquatic rehabilitation programmes provided on waterproof tablet computers, with options for group sessions led by a facilitator or individual. Home exercise options also available.

Aquatic Physiotherapy: aquatic physiotherapy with supervised exercises, techniques and advice from a specialist physiotherapist in a warm hydrotherapy pool. Apart from the benefits mentioned above, the warmth of the water can be beneficial for painful joints or aching muscles.

Whatever a person chooses to take part in, it's a good idea to speak to a swim teacher or instructor beforehand about their condition and the movements they find difficult so that modifications can be made.

What you need to know when supporting swimmers with a musculoskeletal condition

- If someone is new to swimming or aquatic activity, or if they haven't exercised much for some time, it is worth them getting in touch with a physiotherapist. They will be able to help them plan a programme to build up their activity gradually in terms of time and/or intensity.
- Swim England's poolfinder website may help people to search for the right pool to suit their needs: swimming.org/poolfinder/.
- Individuals might want to check whether their local pool offers specific sessions or separate lanes for swimmers of different

abilities. Or they could ask about lessons if they want to learn to swim or improve their swimming technique.

- Swimmers should consider what time of day is best for their condition when planning when to swim.
- They should check how they will get into and out of the pool. Is there a sloping or stepped entry point or a hydraulic chair lift or hoist if they are not comfortable with using a ladder to get in and out for instance?
- If someone wants to do exercises in water rather than swimming, they could ask if they can use the children's or teaching pool at quiet times – this will usually be shallower and often warmer than the main pool.
- Some people may be advised to take painkillers before exercising, but it is important to speak to a healthcare professional about this before doing so.
- If a person is having a flare-up of their arthritis or if they feel generally unwell, then they might want to take a short break from swimming or aquatic activity until they start to feel better.
- If someone has also had to have surgery, there is another fact sheet available titled: 'Swimming and aquatic activity before and after surgery' to help them (see additional advice on the next page).

Specific tips for psoriatic arthritis

- If someone has psoriatic arthritis, which is characterised by patches or dry flaky skin (plaques), swimming is encouraged unless the plaques become open wounds.
- Chlorinated water could aggravate psoriasis, however, a regular skincare routine including showering and applying moisturising creams after swimming, should help to minimise the risk of this.
- Salt water is particularly beneficial for affected skin, improving appearance. Sunlight with outdoor swimming, combined with appropriate sun cream use can also help the condition.

Tips during and after swimming

Before

- If someone finds it hard to motivate themselves to go to the pool, they could consider going with a family member or friend, or making an action plan.
- Before swimming, they should try doing a short warm up in the pool, this could include walking in the water, sculling and stretches.

During

- If someone is unable to put their face in the water, they should consider wearing goggles. This will enable them to adopt a more streamlined position in the water, helping improve their swimming technique and reducing discomfort on their neck and low back.
- Swimmers should try learning some of the aquatic skills such as aquatic breathing, floating, gliding and changing position in the water. These skills will help improve swimming technique and reduce the strain on their body when swimming.
- Floatation aids such as noodles, floats, kick boards or armbands may be helpful if someone needs to develop their technique or rest one part of their body while exercising another.
- It is important to start slowly and gradually build up the time and number of days an individual spends in the water. This will give time for their body to recover but allow them to enjoy the benefits of swimming.

- If someone experiences pain while exercising, they should stop what they're doing that might be causing the pain. If they feel able to, they could try a different stroke or something different such as walking through the water instead. If this doesn't help, they should stop their exercise session and seek advice from their healthcare team before exercising again.
- If a particular swimming stroke seems to cause someone problems, they may benefit from some lessons to improve their technique. Or they could try combining different strokes, for example, if they find that backstroke aggravates their shoulder pain, they could consider sculling with their arms by their side instead. Finding a stroke or variation that works for them is important.

After

- It's quite normal to feel tired after exercising in water, and muscles may ache a bit too afterwards.
- If someone has any joints that are hot and swollen, they could try using an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea towel. They should put this on the affected joint for around 15–20 minutes at a time.
- Individuals may find applying warmth (e.g. a hot water bottle) or a warm bath helps with aching muscles.

- It is normal for muscles to feel tired, stiff or to ache a day or two after exercising. If these feelings are excessive they may have overdone it and should try doing a bit less next time or take more rests, and then try to build up again gradually.

Specific tips for other disciplines

Open water swimming

Swimming regularly in a local pool is a good way of building up someone's fitness and stamina. but if they're thinking of trying open-water swimming in a lido, the sea, lake or river, they may need to do some additional training first. It is best not to swim alone outdoors, so it might be a good idea for them to join a club. Some clubs run introductory courses and training programmes, or can help swimmers prepare for an event. They may also be able to get advice from other members.

Do:

- Think about the temperature of the water. Swimming in colder water could reduce discomfort for some MSK conditions but could also cause some additional discomfort in certain joints, although a wetsuit may help and may also help swimmers float.
- Check the weather in advance and how they will get into and out of the water.

If someone is swimming abroad:

Do:

- Advise to take a copy of their prescription and extra medication, supports and supplies than they would normally need, in case any get lost or stolen.
- Consider local pool hygiene and safety standards as these may be variable.

Additional advice

For further information:

- Moving Medicine resource: movingmedicine.ac.uk/consultation-guides/patient-info-finder/?p=adult&c=msk-pain
- Fact sheet on swimming and aquatic activity before and after surgery: swimming.org/justswim/before-and-after-surgery/
- Good Boost aquatic and home exercise application: goodboost.ai/
- Get started with open water swimming: swimming.org/openwater/how-to-start/
- Versus Arthritis: versusarthritis.org/