Strength Training For Osteoarthritis

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Osteoarthritis (OA) is a disabling chronic condition experienced primarily in the older population. It is the most common type of arthritis resulting in altered joint structure and deterioration of the articular cartilage, and affects hips, knees and the spine amongst other areas. For people with OA, feelings of persistent pain, morning stiffness and reduced function are all too common. Around 10-15% of people over the age of 60 experience OA and risk factors for developing the condition include reduced physical activity, genetics, obesity and previous trauma or injury.

Often people that present to the clinic with OA feel like the 'wear and tear' in their joints means that they cannot possibly get any relief from their symptoms as it is just a structural issue. This often leads to a reliance on pharmacological management with paracetamol, opioids, intra-articular injections or anti-inflammatory medication regularly being prescribed. Contrary to this belief, there is a range of non-pharmacological interventions such as therapeutic exercise that has been proven effective at reducing pain and disability.

When someone has OA for a period, they will often develop secondary effects such as muscle wasting due to pain. This results in reduced stamina and increased fatigue, which feeds into a cycle that increases the above-mentioned muscle wasting. Research has shown overwhelmingly that regular physical activity is one of the most effective treatments for OA as it improves strength, flexibility and function whilst decreasing pain, but which exercise do we choose?

There is a multitude of options for physical activity for people with OA, from walking to water-based exercise and even Tai chi or yoga. Strength or resistance training in a gym or Pilates studio is particularly important for OA sufferers however as it is the most effective form of exercise at increasing muscle strength and reversing the effects of muscle described earlier. It is important that any strength training undertaken is performed at the appropriate intensity and with good control, to avoid further overloading the joints. Strengthening sessions should initially be performed 3-4 times a week in a supervised setting and be gradually progressed in difficulty as exercise becomes easier.



Benefits of strength training for the OA sufferer include:

- Increased bone density
- Improved support of joints through increasing muscle size

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- Improving mobility and posture
- Weight loss (which reduces stress on said joints)
- Improved mood/emotional wellbeing

In a nutshell

Whilst osteoarthritis is a condition that is chronic in nature, there are still options for decreasing pain and increasing function. Using therapeutic exercise in a supervised setting is most effective when supplemented with an individualised medical plan. The key is in finding a tailored program that works for you and your own goals. If you have any questions regarding exercising with OA then please do no hesitate to contact our physios at In Balance Physio & Pilates or your local GP.

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