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Exercise is an important strategy in the management of musculoskeletal diseases such as osteoarthritis and osteoporosis.

What type?

Muscle strengthening exercise is important for those with osteoarthritis and osteoporosis. Those with osteoarthritis often have weaker muscles, poorer balance and limited range of movement. Muscles play an important role in providing stability to joints, controlling movement and in absorbing shock to the lower limb when we walk. Muscle strengthening is needed in those with osteoporosis to help strengthen bone, to improve posture and to reduce the risk of falling and thus sustaining a fracture. Exercise programs should strengthen the thigh, hip and calf muscles as well as the back muscles. The muscles can be strengthened using hand or ankle weights, rubber tubing or by doing exercises in standing using body weight.

Balance exercises are also important as balance declines with age and poor balance is associated with a greater risk of falling. Balance exercises can be done in different positions depending on how good one is at balancing. For example, you could stand on with one foot in front of the other and then progress to standing on one leg.

Other exercises can be done to improve overall fitness. These are designed to increase the heart rate and can include brisk walking, cycling, or swimming. Hydrotherapy is also useful as exercises can be performed with less stress on the joints and less pain.

How much and how often?

The key factor is to start off gently and then to gradually increase the amount that you do. If you have a break for any reason like illness or holidays, then it is important to reduce the amount that you do initially and then build up again.

Exercise should be done regularly, at least 3 times per week, but can also be incorporated into one's daily activities. For example, rising and sitting down on a chair can be repeated several times during the day and this will strengthen the thigh muscles. The most important point is to ensure that exercise becomes part of your life because the benefits will be lost once exercise is discontinued. For this reason, you need to devise some strategies to help encourage you to continue exercising. Keeping a log book, exercising with a friend or joining a group can be useful ways to ensure regular participation.

Safety

With osteoarthritis, there may be some discomfort in the affected joint while performing the exercise however, this should not be excessive. If you notice increased swelling or greater pain the next day, and then you may have overdone the amount of exercise. You should perform balance exercises in a corner so that you will not overbalance and fall. If you have any concerns about an exercise program, you should see a health professional such as a physiotherapist so that a program can be designed specifically for your individual needs.