

Battling Arthur: Arthritis and the Benefits of Physical Therapy

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Arthritis, and its many names: degenerative joint disease, rheumatoid arthritis or “Arthur,” is a disease that affects many Americans. According to the Center for Disease Control arthritis is the leading cause of disability in the United States affecting over 20 million, 2/3 of whom are 65 years old or younger. Arthritis has many forms, the most common being osteoarthritis. Experts have predicted that by the year 2030 the number of adults 65 years of age or older with arthritis will double from 15.7 million to 33.3 million.

It has been shown that diet and exercise can make significant improvements in a person’s arthritic condition. Unfortunately, not all people are motivated to start a diet and exercise program or are knowledgeable enough to know what types of exercises to do. This is where physical therapy can offer immediate treatment intervention.

With a formal physical therapy evaluation, a therapist can help formulate an appropriate course of treatment for a patient, which can include land-based therapy and/or aquatic/pool therapy.

Land-based therapy (outpatient P.T.) focuses on improving overall range-of-motion (ROM), flexibility, strength and endurance as well as educating the patient about his condition. Full ROM allows adequate circulation of synovial fluid in the joint allowing for sufficient lubrication and increased exchange of nutrients/waste products helping the joint to stay healthy. This also prevents patients from compensating, thus reducing the possibility for other associated ailments such as tendonitis, bursitis, etc. Muscles, which are prime movers, also act as “shock absorbers” through eccentric loading. With an overall increase in strength around the affected joint(s), the body is able to dissipate the loading forces evenly around the joint(s). This shock absorption helps decrease “bone-on-bone” stresses and the result is a reduction in pain.

Improving overall endurance and modification of activities (daily task planning) to help reduce stress on the affected joint(s) are also key areas of focus of the physical therapist. Increased endurance will promote more independent and safe activities of daily living not to mention the cardiovascular benefits.

Arthritic patients that do not tolerate land-based exercise, usually weight-bearing exercises, have made better progress in the pool. These exercises become less painful and more bearable. The buoyant properties of the water help “unload” the joints making these activities less painful. The water also provides resistance to help increase strength and endurance at a more comfortable level.

Arthritis is definitely a condition that is going to become more prevalent in the near future. With proper intervention and education, patients can take control of this debilitating disease and improve their overall quality of life.