The Wonder of Water

Eisenhower's Aqua Aerobics class is offered at basic, intermediate and advanced levels.

Recent studies show that aerobic exercise minimizes pain, improves physical function and enhances the overall health of osteoarthritis patients. Certain aerobic exercises, however, are not tolerated well by patients with osteoarthritis. Often, arthritis sufferers either hesitate to begin or fail to continue land-based aerobic exercise programs due of the impact on joints. To avoid these problems, health and exercise professionals strive to identify alternative activities that those with osteoarthritis can do to relieve pain and increase function. One way of achieving the many benefits of aerobic exercise without the adverse effects is through aquatic exercise.

If you suffer with painful osteoarthritis and are hungry for exercise, the pool may be the place to go. The buoyancy of water permits easier joint movement and is impact-free, making aquatic exercise an optimal choice for people with painful joints. In fact, a research team in Australia recently recruited 152 sedentary individuals with painful hip or knee osteoarthritis to participate in a trial designed to determine whether water exercise would alleviate their pain and improve function. In the study, 55 people were assigned to attend water exercise classes for one hour twice weekly for 90 days. Pain and physical function assessments were completed prior to the trial, after the 12 weeks, and 12 weeks following the completion of classes. Results, published in 2007, showed that attendees realized reduction of their pain and improved function — benefits that generally were sustained for three additional months after classes ended.

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The authors concluded that access to 12 weeks of intensive water exercise, tailored for moderately sedentary individuals over age 59 and with chronic symptomatic knee or hip osteoarthritis, resulted in clinical benefits that were sustainable an additional 12 weeks.

The reason for these benefits seems clear; water exercise keeps joints moving, strengthens muscles around joints, helps keep bones strong and healthy, helps participants complete daily activities more easily, and improves overall health and fitness — maximizing energy, improving sleep, controlling weight, strengthening the heart, improving self-esteem, and heightening a sense of well-being. In short, aquatic exercises enable participants to work out vigorously while minimizing the negative effect upon symptomatic joints.

Subscribing to the fact that aquatic exercise benefits osteoarthritis patients is the Arthritis Foundation, which has developed an aquatic program that enables exercise without placing excess strain on joints and muscles. Gentle activities in warm water, facilitated by trained instructors, help participants gain strength and flexibility while reducing pain and stiffness — all without the pounding, pain and impact of aerobics.

While further studies are required to determine long-term benefits of aquatic exercise, the promise of less painful exercise may encourage more patients with osteoarthritis to develop a regular aquatic exercise regimen. Now, osteoarthritis patients can feel better — and feel better longer — thanks to refreshing and restorative aquatic exercise.

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