By Cheryl McEvoy

NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

Aquatic Therapy for Arthritis

When you're suffering from arthritis, the thought of suiting up for aquatic therapy may seem like a stretch. But it's no fish tale; research has shown that water-based programs can help arthritis sufferers better manage their pain.

You may be nervous about trying an alternative therapy program, so before you dive in, read the FAQ below. Then, talk to your provider to determine whether water-based therapy is right for you.

I can barely walk—how do you expect me to swim?

Water supports the body's weight, so there's less pressure on your joints, making mobility easier and less painful. The deeper you go into the pool, the less weight your body bears: at waist-deep, you're down to 50 percent of your normal weight; at chest-deep, you've dropped another 25 percent.

If I'm bearing less weight, will I still get a good workout?

Despite the lightening effects of water, aquatic therapy still challenges the body. Water delivers 12 times the resistance of air, which means even simple maneuvers can make a difference. Over time, the resistance helps build muscle—for arthritis sufferers, that means more support and less strain on joints.

Isn't land better than water?

Research suggests that, for some patients, wetter may be better. Aquatic therapy has been found to yield better results than land-based exercise and relaxation techniques in treating rheumatoid arthritis. Water-based therapy may even be more effective than Tai Chi in reducing osteoarthritis joint pain.

How often will I need to work out?

Aquatic therapy sessions vary, but you'll likely need to hit the pool two or three times per week, for 30 minutes to one hour each session. It's best to adhere to whatever schedule your therapist prescribes—consistent activity will help build supportive muscle.

Can't I just splash around in the community pool?

Any type of movement in water can be beneficial, but it's best to seek professional guidance. An aquatic therapy specialist can design an exercise routine to meet your needs, and supervision will reduce your risk of injury. Therapeutic pools are also heated to a higher temperature than most pools; the warm water isn't just pleasant to step into, it also eases joint pain. ■

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This patient handout was compiled using the following resources:

1. Aquatic Exercise and Tai Chi Effective Therapy for Osteoarthritis. www.arthritis.org/aquatic-tai-chi.php. Accessed April 26, 2010.
2. Eustice, C., & Eustice, R. Water Exercise Helps Osteoarthritis Patients. http://osteoarthritis.about.com/od/osteoarthritisexercise/a/water_exercise.htm. Accessed April 26, 2010.
3. Udesky, L. Aquatic Therapy for Arthritis. www.ahealthyme.com/topic/arthaquatic. Accessed April 26, 2010.

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