PATIENT HANDOUT

Dip Into Aquatic Rehabilitation

Although the benefits of aquatic therapy are well known to doctors and therapists, it's still an underused medium. Many practices don't have the space, staff or resources to offer an aquatic program, and insurance providers may not cover this therapy.

However, you can use aquatic exercise for a range of conditions. Consider joining a local gym or community facility with an on-site pool, or inquire about reduced-rate wellness visits at clinics that offer aquatic therapy.

Aquatic exercise is a skilled intervention with its own rules and applications. Diving in without a plan or medical oversight can be ineffective or even dangerous.

Obtain a medical release and confer with your physician or therapist about an appropriate exercise plan, based on your medical situation. Here's how aquatic therapy can help with the following conditions.

Joint Replacements

After a total hip or knee replacement, aquatic exercise is a pain-free way to continue building strength and flexibility. The water provides buoyancy and three-dimensional resistance.

However, make sure an incision site is closed and clean. Confer with your doctor or therapist to determine appropriate exercises, such as gentle gait training or submerged interval training (walking or running) with tethers or flotation belts. You can also use underwater stretches for the hips, hamstrings, quadriceps, calves and knees. Other appropriate leg movements are kicks, bicycling motions, lateral raises and lunges.

You can add ankle weights or resistance devices. As you progress, consider advancing your routine to include impact exercises, such as underwater jumping jacks, squat jumps, underwater stair climbing or treadmill work. You can also use hand buoys, flotation collars, water cuffs, aqua bells, noodles and fins.

Aerobic fitness can help lower pain levels. But water can make aerobics, strengthening and flexibility easier, so don't overdo it.

Rheumatological Conditions

Osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia respond well to aquatic therapy. Water provides a safe environment that permits spinal extension, promotes synovial fluid bathing of joints, retards muscle atrophy and increases proprioceptive awareness.

Your therapist can customize a program of balance and training movements, gross and fine motor skills, and aerobic and flexibility exercises. A program should account for your type of arthritis, severity, affected joints and age. The optimal water temperature is 92 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. If you have arthritic hands, avoid grip strengthening.

Before exercising, begin with a period of relaxation. Move affected joints through the full range of motion for 3 to 8 repetitions. Pain that lasts more than 2 hours after exercise is a signal to decrease intensity. If you experience nausea, dizziness, increased joint pain or swelling, stop exercising and consult a physician.

Cardiac Rehab

An aquatic environment can boost cardiac efficiency, but pay attention to exercise guidelines. Before beginning a cardiac aquatic rehab program, you should participate in at least 8 weeks of supervised land-based exercise to establish baseline measures for blood pressure, heart rate and angina.

Your physician should consider arrhythmia history and medication side effects before providing a medical release.

Look for a pool between 88 and 92 degrees F. Cold water can trigger arrhythmia; warmer water can impede heat dissipation. If you have a low vital capacity (less than 1.5 liters), the hydrostatic pressure of the water may make breathing difficult, so stay in shallow water or use a supine float.

Keep exercise sessions short and intensity levels low; increases should be gradual. Take frequent breaks. Keep your target heart rate 12 to 17 beats per minute lower than an equivalent land exercise. Avoid horizontal swimming, which is too demanding for cardiac patients.

Have a health professional monitor vital signs before, during and after sessions. Also, you should never exercise unattended. Stop exercising and alert a clinician if you experience pain or shortness of breath. ■

Information adapted from ADVANCE *for Physical Therapists & PT Assistants and the Arthritis Foundation.*

NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education 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.

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