

FORMERLY AT

- Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi
- AIIMS, New Delhi
- The Rizzoli Orthopaedics Institute, Italy
- GELENKPUNKT FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence, Austria
- Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Reducing Your Risk of Osteoarthritis

Millions of Indians have osteoarthritis, and its prevalence continues to increase as the population ages. The good news is that there are steps you can take to reduce your risk of developing osteoarthritis. While it's true that you can't change your genes or your age, you can achieve and maintain a healthy weight, build muscle strength, and increase your flexibility...all of which are great ways to help prevent arthritis.

Step 1: What Are You Eating?

Obesity is the leading cause of osteoarthritis. Being overweight puts extraordinary stress on weight-bearing joints, such as the knees and hips. Did you know that for every pound of weight you lose, you can achieve a four-pound reduction in the load you exert on each knee every time you take a step during your daily activities? So if you lose 10 pounds, you reduce the stress on each of your knees by 40 pounds! If you are overweight, losing 5 to 10 percent of your body weight may reduce your risk of developing arthritis.

The best ways to achieve and maintain a healthy weight are to adopt healthy eating habits and to incorporate physical activity into your routine. Aim for a diet high in fruits and vegetables (five to nine servings a day, of which five or more are from veggies), high in fiber and whole grains, and low in fat.

It's best to be patient. Weight loss is best sustained when the weight is lost gradually. Aim to lose one to two pounds per week. It may have taken you years to accumulate those pounds, so don't be surprised if it take several months to lose them.

Likewise, don't expect your diet to change overnight. Start by looking at what you are eating now (keeping a food diary is a great way to do this) and identifying areas where you can improve. Little steps along the way will add up to big results over time.

Studies have shown that in populations where the diet contains lots of foods with antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids, the prevalence of obesity and osteoarthritis are low. Foods that are high in these nutrients include: berries, fatty fish (including salmon), citrus fruits (such as oranges or grapefruit), and orange and yellow vegetables (for example, peppers).

The key to success is to make changes slowly, finding a diet that you can live with and won't abandon. If you are finding it difficult to get started, a registered dietitian can work with you to show you how.

Step 2: Start Moving!

"Moving is the best medicine." It's aptly named - regular physical activity is essential to both prevent and manage osteoarthritis, and for good reason:

- Regular exercise helps facilitate weight loss, especially if you're following a healthy diet.
- Exercises to strengthen muscles generate more support for your joints.



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- Gentle stretching exercises keep joints flexible and increase range of motion, reducing the risk of injury. Aim for 30 to 45 minutes of exercise at least three times a week — ideally a combination of cardiovascular, strengthening, and stretching exercises. Before embarking on any new exercise program, be sure to check with your doctor to determine what types of exercise are best for you, and any special precautions you may need to take.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Walking:** This is the easiest exercise and can be done just about anywhere. Be sure to wear comfortable, supportive shoes. If you live in a city, you can leisurely walk its parks. For those who live near malls, many malls open their doors early so people can come in and walk in a comfortable environment. Mallwalking groups also provide a social element for people who don't have family close by or others with whom to exercise.
- **Aquatics:** Look for a water aerobics class. Exercising in water reduces stress on the joints and is not associated with a risk of falling.
- **Get on a recumbent bike:** These bicycles enable you to cycle in a comfortable position and help increase your endurance, flexibility and leg strength— all in one exercise.
- **Take a class in gentle yoga:** These exercises have toning, flexibility and relaxation benefits. Plus there's the added advantage of the "shared energy" in these classes as you bend and move with your classmates.
- **Take the stairs:** Not all exercise requires a formal workout. Take the stairs instead of the elevator; get off the subway or bus one stop earlier and walk the rest of the way; or park a little farther out at the mall to burn a few extra calories and get your heart pumping.

Step 3: Be Careful!

Joints that have been injured have a greater risk of developing osteoarthritis over time. So as you move to a more active lifestyle, take these precautions to reduce your risk of injury:

- **Warm up and cool down.** Be sure to stretch gently both before and after any exercise program.
- **Lift weights.** Incorporate resistance exercises, such as gentle weight training, into your exercise routine to strengthen the muscles around your joints. The extra support will reduce your risk of injury.
- **Watch your step.** Take simple precautions to prevent falls, like watching your step if you're walking when it's rainy or icy outside. Above all, find an exercise program that works for you. The more you like it, the easier it will be to stick with it!

