

An Arthritis Relief Strategy That Doesn't Come from a Pill Bottle

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- More than 53 million Americans live with arthritis, yet regular physical activity is considered one of the most effective non-drug strategies for reducing pain, improving mobility, and supporting independence — without relying solely on medications
- You don't need intense workouts to benefit; even short bouts of walking, stretching, gardening, or other movement throughout the day help improve joint function and contribute toward recommended activity goals
- Strength training helps protect painful joints by building the muscles that support them, and blood flow restriction methods such as KAATSU may allow you to gain strength using much lighter weights
- Sitting for long periods allows joints to stiffen and muscles to weaken, making frequent movement breaks throughout the day almost as important as formal exercise sessions
- Exercise works best when paired with a diet that reduces inflammation, including eliminating seed oils such as soybean, canola, and sunflower oil that contribute to oxidative damage and joint stress

Arthritis affects more than 53 million adults in the U.S., making it one of the most common causes of chronic pain and disability.¹ It's a group of conditions marked by joint pain, stiffness, swelling, and reduced mobility — enough to turn everyday tasks such as climbing stairs, carrying groceries, or rising from a chair into painful challenges.

The burden is also growing. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that more than 40% of adults with arthritis already face limits on their daily activities, and the number of Americans diagnosed is projected to climb from 53.2 million to 78.4 million by 2040.²

The toll reaches beyond discomfort: arthritis raises the risk of falls and fractures and adds more than \$2,000 in health care costs per person each year. Yet one of the most effective non-drug strategies for managing arthritis isn't found in a pill bottle. Research indicates regular physical activity may help reduce pain, support mobility, and preserve independence — without the side effects of medication.

Despite that, the message rarely reaches the people who need it most: only 15% of adults age 65 and older meet recommendations for both aerobic and muscle-strengthening exercise, even though nearly half of adults in that age group have arthritis. A recent CDC-published report — a nationwide survey assessing health care providers' knowledge of arthritis-appropriate exercise recommendations — reaffirms the case that movement is one of the most effective non-drug strategies for managing arthritis.

How Movement Supports Arthritis Management

A report published in the CDC's Preventing Chronic Disease journal examined arthritis management and highlighted a fact that often gets overlooked: Physical activity is one of the most effective non-drug strategies for **reducing arthritis pain** and improving physical function.³

Researchers emphasized that regular movement helps people with arthritis improve mobility, function, and overall quality of life. Those improvements translate into practical benefits such as walking farther, climbing stairs more easily, standing up with less discomfort, and maintaining independence as you age.

- **Arthritis creates a cycle that movement helps break** — Arthritis often leads to joint pain, swelling, and stiffness, which naturally makes people less active. Unfortunately, less movement creates a new set of problems. Muscles weaken.

Joints become less stable. Range of motion declines. Everyday tasks become harder. Researchers explained that regular physical activity may help offset that downward spiral by supporting strength, joint mobility, and overall function.

- **The goal is consistent movement, not extreme workouts** — People with arthritis don't need **intense exercise programs** to see benefits. The CDC recommendation is at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week along with two days of muscle-strengthening exercise. Moderate intensity simply means moving enough to raise your heart rate and breathing while still allowing you to carry on a conversation.

Many people hear "150 minutes per week" and immediately assume they need long gym sessions. The researchers stressed a much simpler message: every bit of movement counts. A few short walks, a brief stretching session, or several activity breaks spread throughout the day all contribute toward your weekly goal. That approach makes exercise less intimidating and easier to sustain over time.

- **Several arthritis-friendly activities stood out** — The CDC highlights **brisk walking**, swimming, **yoga**, dancing, gardening, and community exercise classes as examples of activities that help people stay active while being gentle on their joints.⁴

The best exercise is often the one you enjoy enough to repeat consistently. Walking helps improve mobility and endurance. Swimming helps reduce stress on painful joints. Yoga helps maintain flexibility and range of motion. Gardening and dancing keep you moving while providing enjoyment and purpose.

- **Strong muscles protect vulnerable joints** — Researchers emphasized that **strength training** deserves a place alongside aerobic exercise. The muscles surrounding your knees, hips, shoulders, and other joints act like support structures that help absorb force during movement. When those muscles weaken, more stress shifts directly onto already-irritated joints. Strengthening those muscles may help improve stability, reduce strain, and make daily activities easier.

- **Less sitting is almost as important as formal exercise** — The report encouraged people with arthritis not only to exercise regularly but also to reduce sedentary time throughout the day. **Long periods of sitting** allow joints to stiffen and muscles to become inactive.

Frequent movement breaks help maintain circulation, preserve flexibility, and may aid in preventing the gradual decline associated with inactivity. Even standing up, stretching, or taking a short walk every hour helps keep your body engaged.

- **Many health care providers underestimate the power of exercise** — Only about 60% of participating health care providers correctly identified current exercise recommendations for adults with arthritis before completing the educational program — meaning roughly 4 in 10 did not.

After the training, more than 82% reported improved awareness of evidence-based exercise programs and their benefits. This finding highlights how important it is for patients to understand that exercise is not merely an optional add-on. It's a core part of arthritis management.

Arthritis often convinces people that movement causes more harm than good. The evidence reviewed in this report points in the opposite direction. Regular physical activity may help improve pain, mobility, and function. Every walk, stretch, strengthening exercise, or gardening session becomes a step toward maintaining the abilities arthritis tries to take away.

Make Movement Part of Your Arthritis Routine

For most people with arthritis, the most effective tool isn't found in a pill bottle — it's consistent movement. The CDC researchers emphasized that regular physical activity ranks among the most effective non-drug strategies for reducing arthritis pain and improving physical function.

The next step is understanding how to put that research into practice so you can move more comfortably, strengthen the muscles that support your joints, and create an environment that allows your body to recover rather than remain trapped in chronic inflammation.

- 1. Start with movement, not perfection** — If you have arthritis, your goal is not to become an athlete overnight. Your goal is to move more than you did yesterday; any physical activity is better than none. A 10-minute walk around your neighborhood, a few minutes of stretching after breakfast, or a short gardening session all count. Think of it like earning points. Every movement session adds to your weekly total. Those small wins build momentum and confidence.
- 2. Rebuild joint support with smarter strength training** — Weak muscles force painful joints to do more work than they were designed to handle. That's why strength training is considered one of the most important tools for supporting arthritis symptom management. Traditional weight training, however, often feels intimidating when your knees, hips, shoulders, or hands already hurt.

Blood flow restriction training (BFR), including **KAATSU**, offers a different approach, but because it involves deliberately restricting circulation, it's best started with a physical therapist or trained coach, and worth clearing with your doctor if you have cardiovascular or clotting conditions. Special bands are used to partially restrict blood leaving the working muscles.

By briefly trapping blood in the working muscle, this method is thought to mimic some of the low-oxygen conditions associated with heavier lifting, allowing the muscle to be trained with lighter weights. Research in healthy adults has found that walking with blood flow restriction can increase muscle size and strength even at low training loads⁵ — for example, using a 3-pound weight instead of a 15-pound weight.

These findings come from studies in the general adult population rather than people with arthritis specifically, so individual results may vary.

The advantage for arthritis sufferers is that you strengthen the muscles that support and stabilize your joints without placing excessive mechanical stress on already vulnerable tissue. As your muscles become stronger, everyday activities may become easier. Standing up, climbing stairs, carrying groceries, and walking longer distances may require less effort.

Many people also regain something equally important: confidence in their ability to move without fear. If arthritis has left you feeling like your body is working against you, this type of low-load strength training offers a practical path toward rebuilding stability, mobility, and independence.

To learn more about KAATSU, check out my previous article, "[How to Stay Fit for Life](#)," in which I explain in greater detail how to use it. The main difference between KAATSU and BFR is the tool you're using. BFR can be done with restriction bands, but KAATSU uses a device that also provides intermittent and not just constant pressure. The KAATSU set is ideal as it is far easier to dial in to the correct pressures.

You also get the benefit of intermittent pressure automatically, without having to adjust the bands yourself. I recommend the C5 model, because the C-series doesn't have Bluetooth (which emits harmful electromagnetic fields). For a limited time, you can get 10% off any KAATSU equipment by using the promo code DRM.

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3. Choose activities your joints tolerate well — Many people assume exercise means running or high-impact workouts. Arthritis-friendly movement looks very different. If one activity irritates your joints, switch to another. Success comes from finding movement you enjoy enough to repeat. The CDC highlights several activities that work well for people with arthritis:⁶

- Brisk walking

- Swimming
- Water exercise
- Yoga
- Dancing
- Gardening
- Community exercise classes

4. Reduce long periods of sitting — Exercise matters, but what you do during the other waking hours matters too. Long stretches of sitting allow joints to stiffen and muscles to become less active. Set a simple challenge for yourself. Stand up every 30 to 60 minutes. Walk across the room. Stretch your legs. Take a lap around the house.

Those brief movement breaks keep your body engaged and reinforce the habit that produces the greatest long-term benefit: staying active throughout the day instead of waiting for a formal workout. Arthritis often convinces people that rest is the answer. The evidence points in the opposite direction. The more consistently you move within your comfort level, the more opportunities your body has to maintain strength, mobility, and independence.

5. Eliminate seed oils that fuel joint inflammation — Exercise is one of the best tools for relieving arthritis pain, but movement alone won't solve the problem if your joints remain trapped in a constant state of inflammation. Think of it this way: exercise helps rebuild strength and function, while your diet determines whether your body is working with that effort or fighting against it.

One of the biggest dietary obstacles is [seed oils](#). If you're still cooking with soybean, canola, corn, safflower, cottonseed, grapeseed, or sunflower oil, you're feeding one of the major drivers of chronic inflammation. These industrial seed oils

are loaded with **linoleic acid** (LA), a fragile polyunsaturated fat that accumulates in your tissues.

Once incorporated into your cell membranes, LA is highly vulnerable to oxidative damage. As it breaks down, it forms inflammatory compounds that damage cells and help sustain the chronic inflammation associated with joint degeneration.

Arthritis isn't just a mechanical problem. It's also an inflammatory problem. If your joints are constantly exposed to inflammatory signals, recovery becomes much harder.

Start by removing seed oils from your kitchen and replacing them with more stable fats such as grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow. Restaurant foods, salad dressings, sauces, chips, crackers, and most packaged foods are some of the largest hidden sources of these oils. Reducing your LA intake removes a major source of inflammatory stress and creates a healthier environment for your joints to heal and function.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

FAQs About Arthritis and Exercise

Q: Why is exercise considered one of the best strategies for managing arthritis?

A: Exercise helps reduce arthritis pain, improve mobility, strengthen the muscles that support your joints, and preserve independence. According to the CDC report, regular physical activity is one of the most effective non-drug strategies for improving physical function and quality of life in people with arthritis.

Q: How much exercise do I need if I have arthritis?

A: The CDC recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week along with two days of muscle-strengthening exercise. Moderate intensity means you're moving enough to raise your heart rate and breathing while still being able to hold a conversation. Short activity sessions throughout the day count toward that goal.

Q: What types of exercise are easiest on arthritic joints?

A: Some of the most arthritis-friendly activities include brisk walking, swimming, water exercise, yoga, dancing, gardening, and community exercise classes. The best choice is an activity you enjoy and can perform consistently without aggravating your joints.

Q: What is blood flow restriction training and why is it useful for arthritis?

A: Blood flow restriction training, including KAATSU, uses specialized bands to partially restrict blood leaving working muscles during exercise. This may allow you to build strength using very light weights instead of heavy loads. For people with arthritis, that means strengthening the muscles that stabilize painful joints while placing less stress on vulnerable tissues.

Q: What do seed oils have to do with arthritis?

A: Arthritis involves more than wear and tear. Chronic inflammation also plays an important role. Seed oils such as soybean, canola, corn, safflower, cottonseed, grapeseed, and sunflower oil contain high amounts of LA, a fat that's prone to oxidative damage. Reducing these oils and replacing them with more stable fats such as grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow helps reduce a major source of inflammatory stress that can contribute to joint discomfort.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2, 3} Preventing Chronic Disease, 2026;23:250313
- ^{4, 6} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Types of Activities for Arthritis
- ⁵ J Appl Physiol (1985). 2006 May;100(5):1460-6