

Joint benefit from exercise, healthy eating

By Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge

Want to do right by your joints? A low-impact exercise regimen can keep them strong and limber and prevent them from being overburdened by excess weight.

“Low-impact exercise is beneficial for all joints, especially knees and hips,” says Kyle Swanson, orthopedic surgeon at Barton Health’s Tahoe Center for Orthopedics. “Cartilage and soft tissues respond well to exercise by strengthening the joints and maintaining their range of motion. If you don’t exercise and cartilage damage occurs, arthritis, which is cartilage breakdown, can develop.

“Strengthening the muscles around the joints is important, too,” Swanson adds. “Muscles act as shock absorbers, and if they’re strong and healthy, they will help take the load of the body off the joints.”

Low-impact exercises—activities that don’t include weight bearing—are ideal for joint health. Some examples include cycling, swimming, rowing, and walking. If you enjoy running, do so on a pliable surface, such as a dirt trail, rather than asphalt.

“The worst thing you can do is keep your joints immobile,” says Alison Ganong, physical medicine and rehabilitation physician subspecializing in sports medicine and spine health at Barton Health. “Frequent movement promotes the development of protective synovial fluid in the joints.”

Consumption for healthy function

Exercise alone isn’t enough to keep weight off and joints

healthy. Following a heart-healthy diet – eating fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole grains, fish, nuts, and low- or nonfat dairy products, while limiting fats, sodium, and sugar—is equally essential.

Not only does eating healthfully affect your weight, it's an important part of preventing diabetes, which is linked with joint problems. "We have found that the cartilage and soft tissues that make up joints are weaker in individuals with diabetes than in the general population," explains Swanson.

Bones, joints, and surrounding soft tissues also need adequate amounts of vitamin D and calcium, according to Swanson. Good sources of vitamin D include cheese, mackerel, and salmon; the fish also includes beneficial omega-3 fatty acids. Pack in the calcium by enjoying leafy greens, such as spinach and kale.

Planning surgery? Prepare for success

If you're considering joint replacement surgery, your surgeon may recommend a structured program of preoperative exercise to help prepare your body for surgery and ease your recovery.

"This 'prehabilitation' may include flexibility training to maintain or restore range of motion in the affected joint, as well as stretching exercises and physical therapy to work on stabilizing the joint with muscle control," Ganong says. "Patients typically experience atrophy in the joint after surgery, so we want to increase strength as much as possible beforehand to decrease weakening following the procedure."

Postoperative physical therapy will begin in the hospital just hours after surgery and will continue with outpatient rehabilitation after your discharge.

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