

I START Tool

A Client Guide

To facilitate the prescription of muscle strengthening exercise for people with rheumatoid arthritis

CHECKLIST

of discussion points for you and your health and exercise (H&E) professional to put together a **muscle strengthening program**:

1 Let your health and exercise professional know you are interested in learning more about muscle strengthening exercise and ask about the benefits.

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2 **Address any concerns about safety** (muscle strengthening exercise is safe, especially if you start with where you're at, progress slowly, and adjust based on how you feel).

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3 Answer the questions in this tool to help you and your health and exercise professional best prepare to make an exercise program that's right for you.

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4 **Together, create a muscle strengthening program** that takes into account your disease and needs.

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5 **Make a plan** to do your exercises and schedule it in your phone/calendar.

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6 **Check-in on your progress** (either with your health and exercise professional or someone else who keeps you accountable).

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7 Check out additional arthritis exercise resources.

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8 **Keep track** of your exercise progress and disease symptoms.

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What is muscle strengthening exercise?

"Any movement using bodyweight or external resistance that improves muscular strength, power, or endurance, and may ultimately positively impact mobility, function, and independence."¹ Muscle strengthening activities can even be carrying your groceries!



How Can I be Successful in Maintaining my Strengthening Program?

- **What if I'm nervous about getting started?** Remember that some of the activities you're likely already doing are beneficial and a good starting point, such as taking the stairs, lifting groceries, playing with your kids, etc. Start with lighter weights, shorter sessions, and give yourself lots of rest and time to monitor how you're taking the stairs, lifting groceries, playing with your kids, etc. Start with lighter weights, shorter sessions, and give yourself lots of rest and time to monitor how you're feeling.
- **Do I have to go to a gym?** You don't have to go to a gym or lift heavy weights! You can exercise in the comfort of your home and use household items (like water bottles, a filled backpack, cans) or try some other activities that build strength like hiking, kayaking, team sports, yoga, Tai chi, etc.
- **What if I feel pain when I'm exercising?** If it's in the joint and continues to be painful the next day, it's a sign that you should decrease how hard you're working, take more rest, or change the exercise. If it's muscle soreness, it may be okay and is your body adapting to your activities. Consider using padded gloves, cuff weights, wrist hooks, splints, supportive shoes, or wider grips to exercise more comfortably.
- **How hard should I push myself?** This is unique to each individual and will take some experimenting. Start low and slow, use your warm up to scan how your body feels that day, listen to your body during the session, and monitor how you're feeling afterwards. Be flexible and take rest days with lower intensity movement (e.g., walking or wheeling) when you need.
- **Should I stop exercising when in a flare?** "Motion is lotion." Stay active! Move all joints (some just through their range of motion), but decrease resistance and work on the muscles around the joints that are feeling best.

To discuss with your health and exercise professional at your next visit:

Usually, I've been doing muscle strengthening exercise _____ times/week for _____ minutes each time. I've noticed the following changes:

Questions to Answer and Share with Your Health and Exercise Professional

BEFORE meeting with your health and exercise professional, write down your answers to the following questions and share with them in advance if able!

- What are your goals for muscle strengthening and why is that important to you? (e.g., I want to start muscle strengthening once/week to make sure I can lift my kids/grandkids!)
- Currently, what and how much are you doing to strengthen your muscles? (If it's none, that's okay!)
- What kind of access to equipment do you have to do muscle strengthening exercise either at home or at a gym, if any (e.g., resistance bands, machines, household items like books in a backpack or cans used for weights, adaptive devices like splints)?
- How would you prefer to do your muscle strengthening exercise (e.g., would like to go with a friend, use machines, work out from the comfort of your home, have supervision, etc.)?

Questions to Answer and Share with Your Health and Exercise Professional

- What are some challenges that you see getting in the way of you being able to do muscle strengthening exercise regularly (e.g., access to equipment/facilities, scheduling, feeling safe/comfortable to exercise)?
- What are usual flares like? (How long do they last, which joints are worst, what is the type of pain, is there swelling/stiffness?) What do you do to help manage your flares? What time and which days are best for you to do your exercises? (When is your medication the most effective or your symptoms the least severe?)
- Has your healthcare team told you about any health conditions or things you should consider before exercising (for example, uncontrolled symptoms of heart, lung, kidney diseases)?

Conditions that might require special consideration when exercising (e.g., deformity, instability, fusion, osteoporosis, tendinopathy, joints that should be protected, etc.):

Medications and impact on symptoms related to exercise (e.g., changes near infusion dates):

Any important information related to your function or pain?

- Anything else you'd like to share?