

I START Tool

A Client Guide

To help individuals living with rheumatoid arthritis create a muscle strengthening program with their health and exercise (H&E) professional

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

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).

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.

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

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

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

7 Check out additional arthritis exercise videos and other resources

8 Keep track of your exercise progress and disease symptoms.

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 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 using things like your own body weight, resistance bands, water bottles, a filled backpack, cans. If that's not for you, 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 comfortable 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: