

# Physiotherapy & Exercise: Psoriatic Arthritis



*A positive approach*

*to psoriasis and*

*psoriatic arthritis*

# Psoriatic Arthritis – Physiotherapy & Exercise

The right exercises performed on a daily basis are an important part of arthritis treatment. For all people, exercise lessens stress and depression and leads to an improved sense of self-esteem and accomplishment.

This booklet gives you some examples of good exercises for the joints most commonly affected by psoriatic arthritis. It also tries to answer some common questions about exercise and physiotherapy.

## Why should I exercise?

For the person with psoriatic arthritis exercise is doubly important. When a person does not move enough the joints can become stiff and muscles can wither and become weaker. People who have pain often keep the joint in a bent position because it feels better that way. If the joint stays bent too long it can become locked. Such loss of function of that joint could result in deformity. Fusion of a joint and stiffness of the spine are common in psoriatic arthritis. Exercises that move joints are therefore very important.

## How much exercise should I do?

The rule for exercise in arthritis is - do a little daily rather than a lot at once. Proper daily exercise will allow the joints to move more easily and may reduce pain and stiffness. If you have already lost the function of some joints, a regular exercise programme can help prevent further loss. It may help you regain some function and make daily tasks easier.

## Can exercise be tailored to my ability and needs?

Everyone has different levels of fitness depending on the lifestyle they lead. When you get arthritis it is important to decide what sort of things you want to continue to do. That way you will be able to set some goals to work towards. For example, it may be important to keep certain skills for your work or you may wish to continue enjoyable leisure activities such as walking the dog. It may be some weeks before you feel any benefit from your exercises. You must continue to do them during this time.

## What happens if it hurts?

Not all exercises are good for psoriatic arthritis. Getting to know your joints and how the arthritis affects you is important. Strengthening exercises may lead to muscle ache, stretching exercises to joint ache, but these should not give rise to acute pain. If joints are placed under harmful stress, pain will result. It is important to be alert to pain that lasts longer than a couple of hours, particularly after an activity including exercise. Next time do the exercise with less effort or for less time. If it continues to give you pain, stop and change to a different exercise for the same area. If you need advice on this a physiotherapist can help. It is not wise to use exercise videos or books without this advice.

## Should I continue to exercise even if it makes my pain worse?

First of all you need to know if it is the exercise that has made it worse. Did you expect too much too soon? Were you doing the exercises correctly? If all this is OK and you still find your joints hurting, you may need a different type of exercise to start with. A physiotherapist would be able to advise you.

## What else can I do to help myself?

**There are lots of things that can help you control your symptoms.**

- Ice packs - these can be made from a packet of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel or you can buy special packs from a chemist. Ice packs can help reduce the heat and swelling in an inflamed joint. Apply for about ten minutes every two hours. If you have poor circulation, check with your doctor first. Never apply ice directly to the skin.
- Rubbing or massaging an area of swelling can help improve the circulation. Ask your doctor about the use of anti-inflammatory gels that you can buy from pharmacists over the counter.
- Splints to help a painful joint can be supplied by a doctor, physiotherapist or occupational therapist. A collar is a neck splint which can ease neck or shoulder pain. All splints should always be properly fitted by a doctor or physiotherapist.

- Heat may also be useful to relieve pain and stiffness. The simplest forms are a hot bath or shower or a hot water bottle in a blanket. These can be useful to relieve morning stiffness. Do not purchase heat pads or wax baths except on the advice of a doctor or physiotherapist.
- A TENS machine gives low voltage, intermittent currents to painful areas and has been shown to mask pain very effectively. The machines are inexpensive and can be bought or hired. It is always best to try one first under the supervision of a physiotherapist or doctor.

## What is a physiotherapist and how can I get to see one?

Physiotherapists work in many areas of the health service. They are experts in the examination and treatment of muscles and joints. If you have problems exercising, your doctor can refer you to a local physiotherapist for advice. It is best to see a physiotherapist who specialises in arthritis. There is usually one available at your local hospital.

## What is the difference between a physiotherapist and an osteopath or a chiropractor?

These are three different professions each of whom may be able to help to ease the pain of arthritis. All three use forms of manipulation to joints. The physiotherapist has a special knowledge of the types of movement and exercises needed in arthritis and will be able to educate you to help yourself every day.

## What is hydrotherapy?

Hydrotherapy is supervised exercise in a warm pool. The physiotherapist uses the properties of water to help ease stiff joints and strengthen weak muscles. The pool is usually part of the physiotherapy department. Unfortunately not all departments have one and your doctor will have to refer you. Psoriasis is not usually affected by the water but check this first with your doctor. Bring a supply of your usual creams to apply

after the treatment. Once you have learned the right exercises to do, you should enquire at your local swimming pool which may set aside certain sessions for people with medical conditions.

## How can I keep my motivation up?

Daily exercise is best as you get into a routine that you are less likely to break. Finding time once or twice a week to do exercise involving someone else is a good way to ensure you do not get lazy and disillusioned with your routine. Try meeting up to walk the dogs or going to a local swimming group. Choose a time in the day when you are at your best. Try and work your exercises into your daily routine.

## What type of exercise should I do?

*There are two main types of exercise:*

### **Therapeutic and recreational.**

#### **Therapeutic exercises**

Therapeutic exercises are activities based on your exact needs. They are designed to reach a certain goal e.g. to increase muscle strength. There are two types used for arthritis:

- Range of motion exercises help to maintain joint movement, relieve stiffness and restore flexibility. You can prevent loss of movement and deformity in a joint by putting it through a full range of movement every day, even when it is swollen and painful.
- Strengthening exercises help maintain or increase muscle strength. Weak muscles can lead to more joint pain and swelling. Strengthening exercises should not be done when a joint is hot and painful unless you are supervised by a physiotherapist.

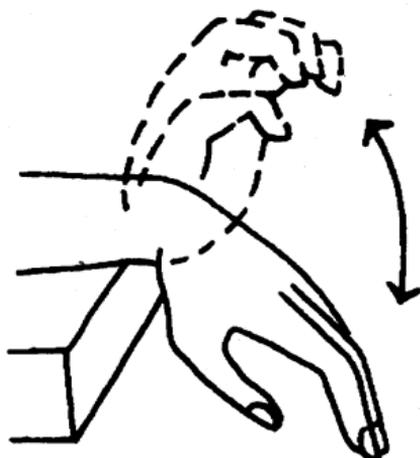
**Examples of some therapeutic exercises for psoriatic arthritis are listed on the following pages.**

## Fingers and hands

1. Forearm supported on a table, hand relaxed over the edge. Extend the wrist and clench your fist - relax and let your hand drop.

**Repeat ten times.**

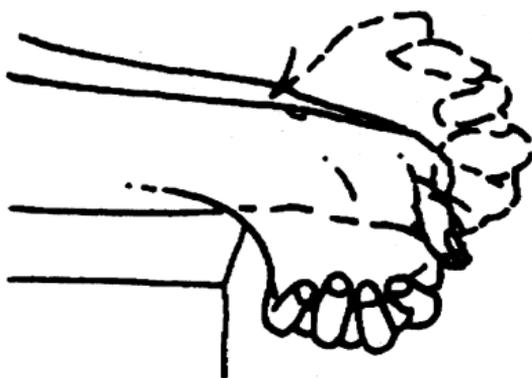
Fig. 1



2. Clasp your hands together and support your forearms on a table with your hands over the edge. Bend your wrist up and down.

**Repeat five times.**

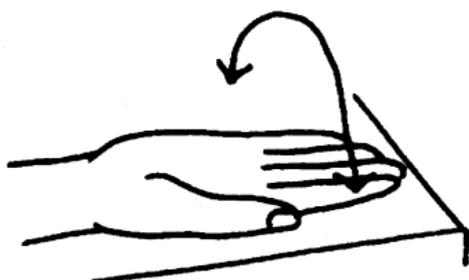
Fig. 2



3. Forearm on a table, elbow tucked in to side and palm turned down. Alternatively turn palm up and down keeping elbow still.

**Repeat ten times.**

Fig. 3



4. Elbow on table with hand up. Straighten fingers out then bend them to touch fingertips to base of fingers.

**Repeat ten times.**



5. Elbow on table with hand up. Bring tip of the thumb to the base of the fifth finger, repeat to fourth, third, second in sequence.

**Repeat five times.**

6. Palm on table. Lift each finger individually off the table.

**Repeat five times.**

## Neck and back

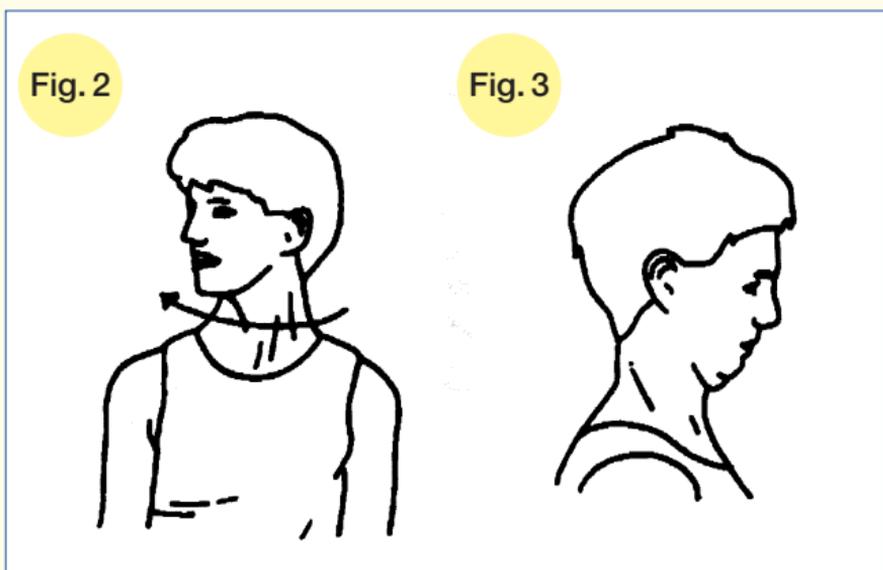
**For the first three exercises sit up straight in a supportive chair**

1. Tilt your head towards one shoulder until you feel the stretch on the opposite side. Hold for approx. five secs. Repeat to the other side.



2. Turn your head to one side until you feel the stretch. Hold for approx. five secs. Repeat to the other side.

**Repeat five times to each side.**

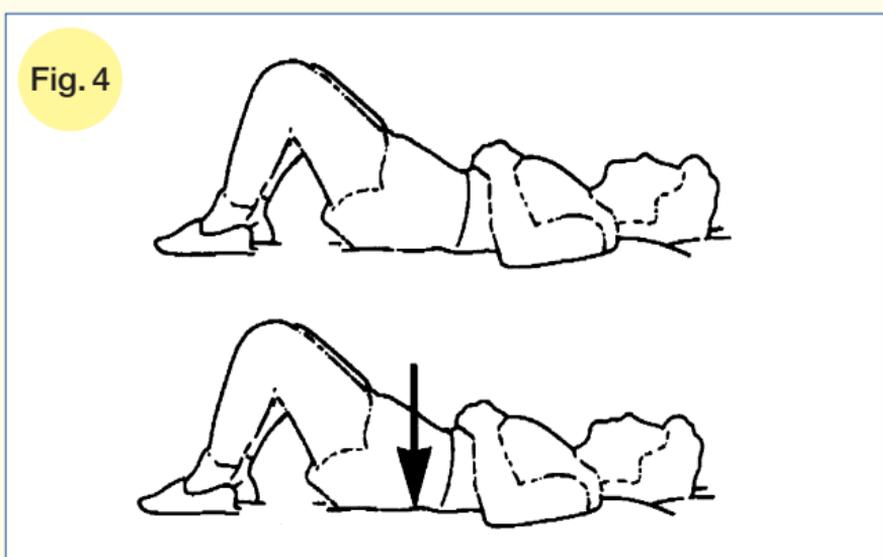


3. Pull your chin in, keeping your neck and back straight (not tipping your head forwards). Hold at the end position and feel the stretch in your neck.

**Repeat five times.**

4. Lie on back with knees bent up, feet flat on the bed. Keeping your shoulders down flat, slowly roll knees from side to side.

**Repeat five times to each side.**



5. Lie on back with hands on stomach, legs bent up, feet flat on the bed. Tighten your stomach muscles to flatten your lower back against the bed.

**Hold for five seconds, repeat ten times.**

6. Lie on back with legs bent as before. Push down through your heels to lift your bottom and lower back off the bed.

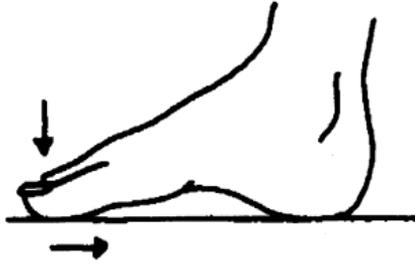
**Hold for five seconds, repeat ten times.**

# Feet and toes

1. Press toes down and shorten foot by pulling up the arch on the inside of the foot.

**Repeat on the other foot.**

Fig. 1



2. Lie with legs out straight and pull feet up, then push feet down.

Fig. 2



3. Circle feet around one way, then the other way.

4. Wiggle toes.

**Repeat each exercise ten times.**

Fig. 3



## Hips and knees

1. Lie face downwards with both legs outstretched for ten minutes. Then gently bend each knee upwards to its limit, relax straight.

**Repeat five times.**

2. Sit with legs outstretched on a firm bed. Press each knee down onto the bed to straighten it. Hold for five seconds. Relax.

**Repeat five times.**

3. Lie on back with knees bent up, feet flat on bed. Bend each knee in turn up onto the stomach, straighten and lower to bed.

**Repeat five times.**

## Jaw

Gently open the mouth to its full width. Stretch a little and hold for five seconds. Close mouth.

**Repeat five times.**

## Recreational exercise

This type of exercise includes any form of movement, amusement, or relaxation that refreshes the body and mind. Recreational exercises or activities may maintain or improve joint range of motion and muscle strength. They may also increase endurance. They add to a therapeutic programme but do not replace it. Examples of good recreational exercise for psoriatic arthritis are:

- Swimming is a good all-round exercise that does not stress your joints. Psoriasis is not generally affected by the chlorine but if you find it becomes itchy when dry apply some barrier cream before you swim and after your shower at the end.
- Walking is another good way of exercising. If your arthritis affects your feet make sure you wear a well fitting pair of shoes.
- Cycling can be an alternative to walking and is often more comfortable on the feet.

# No EXCUSES!

## The Excuse

## The Answer

- **No Time to Exercise** use some of your daily activities as an exercise
- **In Too Much Pain** do your exercises when your tablets are working best
- **Exercise is Boring** try to change the exercises you are doing regularly. Exercise with someone
- **Too Hard** these exercises are only examples. There are plenty of others that may be better for you. Ask for help
- **Too Easy** as above

## Summary

- Set your limits.
- Mix your exercises to avoid boredom.
- Ease out stiffness, do not force your joints.
- Regular low impact routine exercise is best.
- Avoid stressing your joints with high-impact activities ie jogging!
- Accept the odd set-back.
- Little and often is best, especially for weak muscles.
- Swimming is a good all-round exercise.
- No Excuses – regular, gentle activities will keep you mobile and fit!

Always consult your own doctor or your healthcare provider.

This material was produced by PAPAA. Please be aware that treatments and research is ongoing. For the latest and up to date information or any amendments to this material please contact us or visit our website

First published 2008 © PAPAA

Reviewed and revised August 2009



## **The Charity for People with psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis**

**PAPAA** the single identity of the  
Psoriatic Arthropathy Alliance and the  
Psoriasis Support Trust.

**The organisation is independently funded and is a  
principal source of information and educational  
material for people with psoriasis and psoriatic  
arthritis in the UK.**

**PAPAA supports both patients and professionals by  
providing material that can be trusted (evidence  
based), which has been approved and contains no  
bias or agendas.**

**PAPAA provides positive advice that enables people  
to be involved as they move through  
their healthcare journey in an informed way,  
which is appropriate for their needs and any  
changing circumstances.**

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ISBN 978-1-906143-05-3



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Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance is a company limited by guarantee  
registered in England and Wales No. 6074887

Registered Charity No. 1118192

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