



**Hydrotherapy**  
and arthritis

This booklet provides information and answers to your questions about this therapy.

# What is hydrotherapy?



It's well known that swimming is a good form of exercise for people with arthritis, but you don't have to be able to swim to enjoy the benefits of exercising in water. This booklet aims to explain how and why hydrotherapy is used to help ease pain and improve mobility in the joints of people with arthritis and related conditions.

At the back of this booklet you'll find a brief glossary of medical words - we've underlined these when they're first used in the booklet.

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## What is hydrotherapy?

Hydrotherapy is the use of water in the treatment of a range of conditions, including arthritis and related disorders. Hydrotherapy differs from swimming because it involves special exercises that you do in a warm-water pool. The water temperature is usually 33–36°C, which is warmer than a typical swimming pool.

You'll normally have hydrotherapy treatment within a hospital's physiotherapy department. Usually a physiotherapist or a physiotherapist's assistant with specialist training will show you how to do the exercises. Depending on your symptoms, the focus of the exercises can be adjusted to help your range of movement or strength. It tends to be different to aquarobics, which can be quite strenuous, as it's generally more focused on slow, controlled movements and relaxation.

## Is hydrotherapy similar to spa therapy?

Spa therapy is based on the theory that the mineral content of spa water has special health-giving properties. In many European countries, hydrotherapy often takes place in spa water. Although there's some research that suggests the mineral content of the water may make a difference, other studies show that hydrotherapy has significant benefits regardless of the water used.



**Hydrotherapy involves special exercises that you do in a warm-water pool.**

## What types of arthritis is hydrotherapy used for?

Hydrotherapy is beneficial for people with arthritis in just one or in many joints. It's sometimes used after joint replacement surgery or for people with back pain, ankylosing spondylitis, psoriatic arthritis and osteoarthritis, but it can be used by anyone with different types of arthritis if you'd like to try it.

Treatment sessions usually have more than one person in the pool, although exercises tend to be tailored to each individual. Sometimes group sessions are provided for people with similar conditions.

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**i See Arthritis Research UK booklets**  
*Ankylosing spondylitis; Back pain; Neck pain; Osteoarthritis; Psoriatic arthritis.*

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**Hydrotherapy  
combines the  
benefits of exercise  
and soothing  
warm water.**

## How does hydrotherapy help?

Hydrotherapy can help in a number of different ways:

- The warm temperature of the water allows your muscles to relax and eases the pain in your joints, helping you to exercise.
- The water supports your weight, which helps to relieve pain and increase the range of movement of your joints.
- The water can be used to provide resistance to moving your joints. By pushing your arms and legs against the water, you can also improve your muscle strength.

## How effective is hydrotherapy?

Scientific studies have shown that hydrotherapy can improve strength and general fitness in people with various types of arthritis. The exercises can be tailored to your individual needs, so you can start slowly and gradually build up your strength and flexibility.

The extra support that the water provides may make you feel like you can do more exercise than normal, so be careful you don't overdo it. The exercise and the warmth of the water may make you feel tired after treatment, but this is quite normal. In general, hydrotherapy is one of the safest treatments for arthritis and back pain.

## Accessing hydrotherapy

Any member of the healthcare team, including your doctor or rheumatology nurse specialist, should be able to refer you to an NHS physiotherapist if they think you might benefit from hydrotherapy. In some parts of the UK you may also refer yourself to a physiotherapist, who can then assess whether hydrotherapy would be suitable for you. Check with your GP or call your local rheumatology department to find out if an NHS physiotherapist in your area will accept self-referrals.

Hydrotherapy sessions are available on the NHS, and most hospitals have access to hydrotherapy pools. You can also choose to use private healthcare if you want to, but it's important to be aware that in rare instances private hydrotherapy may be unregulated, and so the quality of the changing areas, the water or general environment can vary enormously. Check before your treatment starts that you're happy with the facility. A qualified physiotherapist will be registered with the Health Professionals Council (HPC), and it's recommended that you see someone who's a member of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists (CSP) and who's accredited by the Aquatic Therapy of Chartered Physiotherapists (ATACP).

Before you start hydrotherapy, you'll be seen by the physiotherapist in your hospital's physiotherapy department, on the hospital ward or possibly in the physiotherapist's own surgery.

# You don't have to be able to swim to benefit from hydrotherapy.

They'll ask about your general health and your arthritis and assess your individual needs. Using this information and the information provided by your doctor, the physiotherapist will then advise on whether hydrotherapy is appropriate for you. This initial assessment normally takes about 30–45 minutes.

When a course of hydrotherapy is agreed, it usually involves five or six 30-minute sessions. Not all physiotherapy departments have a hydrotherapy pool, so you may have to travel to another hospital.

## What do I need?

You'll usually need to take your own swimming costume and towel. You should also take along medication that you would need while exercising, for example an inhaler, [GTN spray](#) or glucose tablets if you have [diabetes](#).

## What if I can't swim?

You don't have to be able to swim to benefit from hydrotherapy. The pool is usually quite shallow (about chest

height), so you can exercise well within your depth. There will always be two members of the healthcare team present, usually a physiotherapist and an assistant, and one of them will be in the pool with you. You can also use flotation devices.

Even if you're nervous about being in the water it's worth trying hydrotherapy – most people find the warm water soothing and pleasant.

## How do I get in and out of the pool?

There'll be a few steps down into the pool, but if you have trouble with steps there'll also be a mechanical hoist to get you in and out of the water. Most pools have different depths, varying from waist height to chest height, and there'll be a rail around the edge of the pool for extra support.

## What else do I need to consider?

In certain situations you may not be able to have hydrotherapy. You must tell your physiotherapist if you have any of the following:

- a wound or skin infection
- a virus or stomach upset
- a raised temperature
- high or low blood pressure
- breathing difficulties
- a kidney condition requiring dialysis
- angina or heart problems







- incontinence
- a chest infection
- a chlorine allergy
- uncontrolled diabetes, asthma or epilepsy.

Your physiotherapist will decide with you whether hydrotherapy is suitable. The decision will be based on the severity of your condition, whether it affects more than one part of your body and what medication you take. Hydrotherapy isn't advised if you have certain conditions in the list, but with others it's just to inform the physiotherapist so they can take necessary precautions if required.

## **What happens at the end of a course of hydrotherapy?**

Exercise is helpful for almost all types of arthritis and one of the main aims of hydrotherapy treatment is to give you confidence to continue and manage a programme of exercises on your own once the course has finished. Your physiotherapist will probably suggest that you carry on with your exercises in your local swimming pool.

It's worth finding out what facilities are available locally. Some pools have special sessions when the water temperature may be increased and some sports centres offer water-based exercise classes.

**Many people choose to continue their exercises after their initial course of hydrotherapy finishes.**

Ask your doctor or physiotherapist for advice before you join a class to make sure it's suitable. You should also speak to the instructor about your arthritis and its effects so they can adapt some of the exercises for you if necessary. It may also be possible to pay for further sessions without the physiotherapist in the hospital pool.

In some areas, local arthritis support groups (such as Arthritis Care or the National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society) may hire a hospital or health club pool for hydrotherapy sessions.

If you can't swim, it might be worth learning – swimming can be an excellent form of exercise for improving your fitness and mobility without putting a lot of strain on your joints. Ask a health professional for advice if you're not sure whether it would be suitable for you.

## Glossary

**Ankylosing spondylitis** – an inflammatory arthritis affecting mainly the joints in the back, which can lead to stiffening of the spine. It can be associated with inflammation in tendons and ligaments.

**Diabetes** – a medical condition that affects the body's ability to use glucose (sugar) for energy. The body needs insulin, normally produced in the pancreas, in order to use glucose. In diabetes the body may produce no insulin or not enough insulin, or may become resistant to insulin. When the body is unable to use glucose obtained from foods the level of sugar in the blood increases. If untreated, raised blood sugar can cause a wide variety of symptoms.

**GTN spray** – a medication that can be used to prevent and treat the symptoms of angina.

**Osteoarthritis** – the most common form of arthritis (mainly affecting the joints in the fingers, knees, hips), causing cartilage thinning and bony overgrowths (osteophytes) and resulting in pain, swelling and stiffness.

**Physiotherapist** – a therapist who helps to keep your joints and muscles moving, helps ease pain and keeps you mobile.

**Psoriatic arthritis** – an inflammatory arthritis linked to the skin condition psoriasis.

## Where can I find out more?

If you've found this information useful you might be interested in these other titles from our range:

### Conditions

- *Ankylosing spondylitis*
- *Back pain*
- *Neck pain*
- *Osteoarthritis*
- *Psoriatic arthritis*
- *Shoulder pain*

### Self-help and daily living

- *Keep moving*
- *Pain and arthritis*
- *What is arthritis?*

### Therapies

- *Physiotherapy and arthritis*

You can download all of our booklets and leaflets from our website or order them by contacting:

### Arthritis Research UK

PO Box 177  
Chesterfield  
Derbyshire S41 7TQ  
Phone: 0300 790 0400  
[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

### **Related organisations**

The following organisations may be able to provide additional advice and information:

#### **Arthritis Care**

18 Stephenson Way  
London NW1 2HD  
Phone: 020 7380 6500  
Helpline: 0808 800 4050  
[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

#### **Chartered Society of Physiotherapy**

14 Bedford Row  
London WC1R 4ED  
Phone: 020 7306 6666  
[www.csp.org.uk](http://www.csp.org.uk)

#### **National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society (NASS)**

Unit 0.2, One Victoria Villas  
Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2GW  
Phone: 020 8948 9117  
[www.nass.co.uk](http://www.nass.co.uk)

#### **National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)**

Unit B4, Westacott Business Centre  
Westacott Way  
Littlewick Green  
Maidenhead SL6 3RT  
Phone: 0845 458 3969 or 01628 823524  
Helpline: 0800 298 7650  
[www.nras.org.uk](http://www.nras.org.uk)



## We're here to help

Arthritis Research UK is the charity leading the fight against arthritis.

We're the UK's fourth largest medical research charity and fund scientific and medical research into all types of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions.

We're working to take the pain away for sufferers with all forms of arthritis and helping people to remain active. We'll do this by funding high-quality research, providing information and campaigning.

Everything we do is underpinned by research.

We publish over 60 information booklets which help people affected by arthritis to understand more about the condition, its treatment, therapies and how to help themselves.

We also produce a range of separate leaflets on many of the drugs used for arthritis and related conditions. We recommend that you read the relevant leaflet for more detailed information about your medication.

Please also let us know if you'd like to receive our quarterly magazine, Arthritis Today, which keeps you up to date with current research and education news, highlighting key

projects that we're funding and giving insight into the latest treatment and self-help available.

We often feature case studies and have regular columns for questions and answers, as well as readers' hints and tips for managing arthritis.

### Tell us what you think of our booklet

Please send your views to:  
**feedback@arthritisresearchuk.org**  
or write to us at:  
Arthritis Research UK, PO Box 177,  
Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 7TQ.

A team of people contributed to this booklet. The original text was written by Dr Philip Helliwell, who has expertise in the subject. It was assessed at draft stage by physiotherapists Jacqueline Adams, Maureen Motion, Nicola Scrafton and Karen Smith. An **Arthritis Research UK** editor revised the text to make it easy to read and a non-medical panel, including interested societies, checked it for understanding. An **Arthritis Research UK** medical advisor, Dr Jonathan Hill, is responsible for the content overall.

## Get involved

You can help to take the pain away from millions of people in the UK by:

- Volunteering
- Supporting our campaigns
- Taking part in a fundraising event
- Making a donation
- Asking your company to support us
- Buying gifts from our catalogue

To get more **actively involved**, please call us **0300 790 0400** or e-mail us at [enquiries@arthritisresearchuk.org](mailto:enquiries@arthritisresearchuk.org)

**Or go to:**  
[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)



Providing answers today and tomorrow

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calls charged at standard rate

**[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)**

Registered Charity No 207711  
© Arthritis Research UK 2011  
Published April 2011 2254/HYDRO/11-1

