

To bend with ease, take care of your knees

By Aaron Warnick

At some point during your life, it's likely you'll experience problems with your knees. Knees play an important role in helping us walk and bend, which means that they're frequently in use. And like all parts of our bodies, sometimes they can wear out or be injured.

Think of your knees as part of a machine. Without regular upkeep, the system is strained and will eventually fail. And while you can't oil up your knees to make them more efficient, you can find ways to reduce the stress you put on them — allowing them to function better throughout your life.

"Knee health is so important for mobility, functionality and comfort," says Alice Wilcoxson, PhD, a physical therapist and professor at Purdue University.

Keep it moving

Keeping your knees healthy is largely about making healthy lifestyle choices. One is to stay active. When you're at work or home, make sure to take frequent breaks from sitting.



>> For more information and tips on keeping your knees healthy, visit www.niams.nih.gov

Building up the muscles around your knee will help support the joint. Squats and step-up exercises will build up your thighs and your glutes — a strong butt is good for your knees! Cardio exercises help keep your knees strong and flexible too.

The U.S. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease says to choose gentle exercises if you have ongoing knee pain, such as walking, swimming and other aquatic exercises.

Your doctor or health care specialist can give you advice on exercises that are best for you.

Watch how you go

Your knees work best when you have good posture. Poor posture means your body — the machine — isn't lining up right, causing joint strain. So make sure your posture is good. Keep your head upright and your shoulders back. When walking, pick up your feet and roll your foot from heel to toe.

Your knees carry you through the world. Finding ways to make that task easier for them will keep them healthy longer. It's also smart to limit how often you carry heavy things. So if you have a lot

of groceries, think about making multiple trips to carry them.

If you're going on a run or walk, think about the surface you'll be on. Dirt and grass will be softer on your knees than pavement, meaning your knees will sustain less wear.

Eating well can also benefit your knees. Make sure you're getting enough calcium and vitamin D to strengthen your bones. A healthy diet can also help keep weight in a normal BMI range. People who are overweight or obese place a lot of extra weight on their knee joints, as well as their hips and back.

Reach out for relief

If your knees hurt due to age or injury, it might seem like there is nothing you can do for better knee health. But that's not true. With help, you can find some relief.

Talk to your health care provider about your knee pain. It's possible you're experiencing arthritis that is treatable with medicine. Or you may have an injury that can be healed through a medical procedure or physical therapy.

When you engage in physical therapy, stick with the routine and have patience, even if the exercises seem easy or boring. Some of the



therapies for knee injury or pain take weeks or months, depending on the severity of your problem.

Your insurance may limit how many visits you can make to a physical therapist, but work to rehabilitate your knees is not over when your visits are.

Many physical therapy exercises can be done at home. Physical therapy patients are typically given instructions for stretches and exercise to do regularly on their own.

"It's critical that you communicate with your physical therapist and you follow the home exercise program," Wilcoxson says.

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Knee lifts by Lafor; outdoor woman, Lzf; gardening duo, Adamkaz



Stretch it out before you work out

Regular stretching can help keep your knees in shape, especially if you do it before you exercise.

- ◆ Stretching is important, but don't start out your exercise routine that way. Do a little exercise such as a light jog or skipping to warm up and get your blood pumping.
- ◆ Once you get your body temperature up a little bit, then stretch, holding each pose for 10 to 30 seconds.
- ◆ Don't overdo your workout. Stretching won't prevent injury if you exercise too much. All it takes is one bad step to get hurt.
- ◆ After your workout, remember to stretch some more.