
Exercise Therapy Improves Arthritis Patients' Physical Functioning

By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Exercise and education may give people with knee arthritis a small but important physical and emotional lift, a research review suggests.

In an analysis of 16 studies, researchers at San Diego State University found that both exercise therapy and self-management programs tended to lessen the overall burden of having knee osteoarthritis (OA).

Exercise generally improved arthritis patients' physical functioning, whereas self-management programs -- which teach people how to deal with the daily ups and downs of living with knee OA -- tended to boost their psychological well-being.

The improvements were generally modest, however, and the overall evidence suggests that many knee arthritis sufferers need a combination of therapies, the study authors report in the Journal of Rheumatology.

Still, the findings offer a positive message to people with knee OA, lead author Dr. Loraine Devos-Comby told Reuters Health.

Exercises designed for the knee -- which in these studies included walking, stationary cycling and strength training -- can improve physical health, she said, while self-management programs cover any of a range of topics to help people deal with knee OA, from relaxation, imagery and diet changes to proper use of assistive devices.

"Patients should turn to the programs that are most likely to improve the areas in which they suffer most from OA," Devos-Comby said. This may mean trying more than one therapy, according to the researcher.

Studies generally focus on single interventions for knee OA in order to test that therapy's specific effects. But in reality, Devos-Comby noted, people are likely to need multiple approaches.

Future studies, she said, should test programs that combine exercise with self-management techniques to improve both physical and mental well-being.

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