

Aquatic physiotherapy

Exercising in warm water has long been used as a way of gently moving painful joints, rehabilitating after injury or flares of arthritis and helping to keep fit. Recent NICE guidance has advised that health professionals should consider offering hydrotherapy (also more recently known as aquatic physiotherapy, AqPT) as an adjunct to other dry-land forms of exercise. Exercising in a warm pool can be a helpful way for people to get moving and keep fit with less pain.

How do the properties of water help problems from psoriatic arthritis?

Water is special because it provides buoyancy which reduces the load on weight-bearing joints such as the back, hips, knees, ankles and feet. This means that activities that can be very difficult on dry-land such as walking, squatting and even jogging can be much easier in the water. The buoyancy can also assist movement so can be very helpful for exercising painful, stiff shoulders and elbows as well as the lower limb joints. The pool is a safe environment to be able to practise balance exercises because of the support the water provides. This can help develop confidence with starting or returning to exercising.

Julie (a patient with psoriatic arthritis) used hydrotherapy when first diagnosed and now to keep her fitness and mobility:

"It is such a fabulous feeling to be able to move so freely in the lovely warm water, with minimal pain or stiffness, I can even jog my way round the pool! The benefits of moving freely continue for a while afterwards as well so it's a win win!"

The water can also be used as a resistance to movement for strengthening muscles. The unique quality of water is that the quicker you move the more force it applies. Slow movements will only create a gentle resistance which means water exercises can be adapted for a person's individual ability.

Exercises can be undertaken in any pool, however the temperature of hydrotherapy pools is typically around 35 degrees celsius. The warm water creates an environment which is comfortable even when exercising slowly. People are able to enjoy exercising for longer as they do not get as cold as they might in a cooler pool. The warmth can be soothing for stiff, painful joints and can stimulate blood flow.

The temperature and the sensation of being in water can produce a relaxation effect.

Another property of water is hydrostatic pressure. This pressure increases with depth caused by the weight of the water pressing down from above. This can be of great benefit to decrease swelling and can be used to increase demands on the heart and lungs for fitness training.

Along with the benefits of exercise on mental health and well-being, immersion in water also suppresses the sympathetic nervous system which can have a positive effect on mental well-being.

What to expect in a pool session?

Typically you would be assessed by a physiotherapist and agree a treatment plan. This should include:

- poolside assistance if required
- goals of your rehabilitation
- appropriate exercises and progressions.

Therapy may be provided on an individual basis or in a group setting.

Time in the water and number of sessions may vary depending on ability and nature of the problem.

You should take: a swimming costume, a towel and medication that you may need when exercising, such as an inhaler, GTN spray or glucose tablets if diabetic.

Floatation aids and other equipment may be used

Sometimes people may feel some aching and tiredness when first starting which normally improves as your fitness improves.



Anna Carter and Dr. Carol McCrum

You will be encouraged to drink plenty of water after your sessions to stay hydrated.

You may be encouraged to explore local pool facilities so you can continue your programme independently to help manage your condition in the longer term. Some hydrotherapy pools offer access in fee-paying groups and private hire.

Common concerns for people with psoriasis and some solutions that can help

"I can't swim!"

You do not need to be able to swim to participate in hydrotherapy

"I'm scared of water"

Pools often have shallow and deeper areas and handrails so you do not ever have to be out of your depth. Your therapist will help build your confidence in the water.

"I am worried about my skin"

Most people do not have any problems with the pool water affecting their psoriasis. Rash vests or t-shirts can be worn if feeling self-conscious. Vaseline can be used as a skin barrier and does not affect the pool chemicals. Showering well and applying cream after sessions is important.

"Can you go in a pool with a stoma bag or catheter?"

Yes! Most stoma / catheter bags can be submerged in water but it is a good idea to check with the manufacturer. It is important to have an empty bag before your pool session. You can purchase specialist swimwear which can cover your bag.

"I don't like getting cold!"

Hydrotherapy pools are typically 35 degrees so you should not feel cold in the pool. If you are in a cooler pool then rash vests or T-shirts can be worn. Warm towels or dressing gown can be left poolside to use after getting out.

"I'm embarrassed about my body"

People of all shapes and sizes attend hydrotherapy sessions. They are all there with the same aim to help their condition. Some pools offer single-sex sessions. Cover-up swimsuits can be purchased or additional clothing can be worn.

"My eyes get sore with chlorine"

Goggles can be worn to protect your eyes. You do not have to put your head underwater.

"Can I do hydrotherapy during a flare?"

Hydrotherapy can be helpful to gently maintain mobility during a flare and may help to ease the pain.



"I'm worried I can't get in and out of the pool"

Most hydrotherapy pools have both steps, handrails and hoist access if required. Assistance can be provided as needed.

How can I access aquatic physiotherapy?

A number of NHS Trusts across the UK provide access to a hydrotherapy pool. Referral to the hydrotherapy service can be arranged through your GP, local physiotherapy and rheumatology services.

There may also be private hydrotherapy facilities local to you which can be accessed.

Medical screening will be undertaken to ensure it is safe for you to undertake hydrotherapy. It is important that your physiotherapist is aware of any other medical problems you may have so they can be taken into account.

Helpful links and resources

Aquatic Therapy Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (ATACP)
<https://atACP.csp.org.uk/>

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP)
www.csp.org.uk

Specialist swimwear
<https://supplierdirectory.disabledliving.co.uk>

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