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# Physiotherapy advice for patients experiencing aromatase inhibitor- induced arthralgias

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## **Physiotherapy**

## **Patient Information**



**NHS**



## Introduction

The aim of this leaflet is to give you some tips on how to:

- Improve your joint and muscle discomfort
- Maintain/improve your bone health
- Regain/increase your activity levels

As part of your treatment for breast cancer your doctor has prescribed an aromatase inhibitor medication for you, such as Letrozole, Anastrozole or Exemestane. Many women will experience a range of side effects from this medication and some of these effects can have an impact on your daily life. Patients taking Tamoxifen and those whose treatment results in suppressed ovarian function may also experience similar side effects.

**Common side effects** include joint pain and stiffness (arthralgia) which tend to be worse first thing in the morning. This stiffness particularly affects the joints of the hands, wrists and knees although any joint in the body can be affected.

**Other side effects** include muscle aches and pains (myalgia) and a decrease in the gripping strength in your hands. More rarely reported symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome (a condition causing inflammation of the tendons at the wrist resulting in pain and altered sensation in the hands) and trigger finger (a swelling of a tendon in the hand causing the finger to bend or lock) can have a major impact on your daily activities.

Another factor is the effect of these medications on bone mineral density which can result in a loss of bone strength and an increased risk of bone fractures. Your doctor will be able to advise you if you are at risk and may regularly monitor your bone density.

## Managing side effects

There is growing evidence that treatment strategies to manage these side effects can help to reduce the symptoms. These strategies range from taking painkillers and dietary supplements to increasing your activity levels. Specific dietary advice is available for patients with breast cancer; please see the patient information booklet *Diet and breast cancer*.

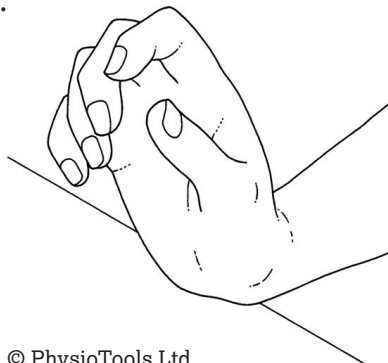
## Improving joint and muscle discomfort

As these symptoms are more noticeable first thing in the morning, it may be helpful to try some stretches of the affected joints. Local warmth can ease discomfort and make these stretches easier to perform therefore a shower or bath in the morning may help. Running a basin of warm water and gently bending and straightening the fingers and wrists under the surface of the water for a few minutes can loosen stiff finger joints.

## Stretching exercises

### Wrist

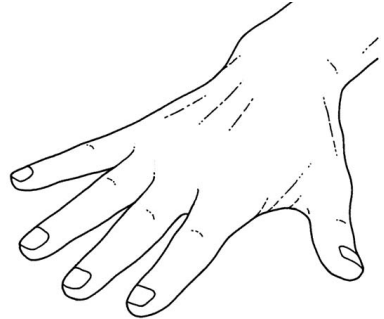
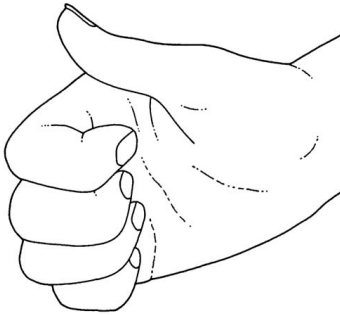
- Place your forearm on a table with your hand over the edge
- Gently extend your wrist towards you, and then relax and let your hands and fingers drop down over the edge of the table
- Repeat 10 times.



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## Fingers

- First bend your finger tips, then the next joint, and then make a fist
- Then straighten out all your fingers as wide as you can
- Repeat 10 times.

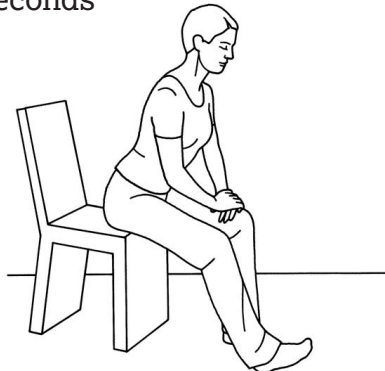


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It is also important to stretch the muscles around your hip and knee:

## Leg and knee – back

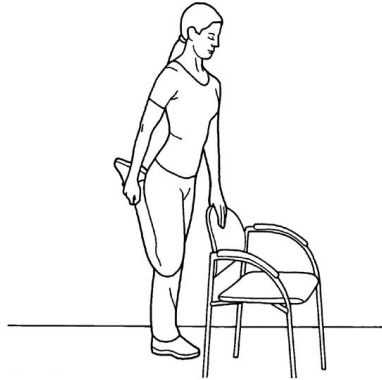
- Sit on a chair, put one leg in front of the other with your knee slightly bent and lean forward keeping your back straight
- Hold for 15-20 seconds
- Repeat 3 times.



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## Leg and knee – front

- Stand whilst holding on to a support with one hand and to your ankle with the other hand
- Pull your ankle towards your bottom, bending your leg
- Hold for 15-20 seconds
- Repeat 3 times.



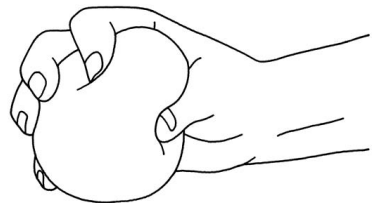
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## Strengthening exercises

Strengthening the muscles around a joint can help to protect the joint and reduce pain. If you are finding walking uncomfortable because of knee pain, some non-weight-bearing exercises may help initially. These will be more beneficial if performed regularly, gradually building up the number of repetitions as your comfort allows.

## Wrist and hand

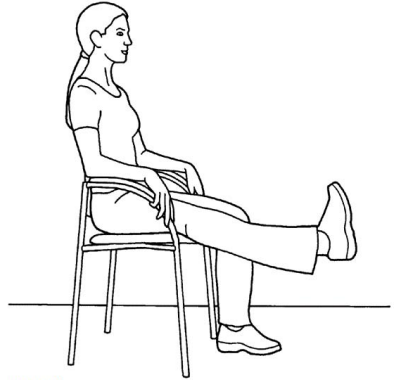
- Hold a soft ball in the palm of your hand and squeeze as firmly as you can
- Hold for 3 seconds then release
- Repeat this action 10 times.



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## Knee

- Sitting on a chair, pull your toes up, tighten your thigh muscles and straighten your knee
- Hold for 5 seconds, and slowly relax your leg
- Repeat 10 times on each leg.



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- Lying or sitting on the bed with legs straight, bend your ankles towards you and tighten your thigh muscles pushing your knees down firmly into the bed
- Hold for 5 seconds and relax
- Repeat 10 times.



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- **Progress** this exercise by raising the leg 2-3 inches off the bed, keeping the muscle on the top of your thigh tight and the knee straight
- Lower slowly
- Repeat 10 times.

Continuing with any shoulder exercises you have been given is also important to maintain flexibility and strength in your shoulder.

## Exercises to improve bone health

Ideal activities that help improve bone mineral density include resisted and weight-bearing exercises. However, you may need to be careful with any resisted or repetitive exercise with your affected arm if you are at risk of developing lymphoedema. Build up your amount of exercise slowly and gradually, adding in light weights if you feel comfortable to do so.

Walking is one of the best forms of weight-bearing exercise and setting a brisk pace will also have benefits on cardiovascular health. Other types of weight-bearing endurance exercise include climbing stairs, dancing, playing tennis and jogging. If you have any concerns about your balance or have had any falls, you should avoid activities that put you at risk of falling.

Keeping your weight within normal limits can also have a beneficial effect on your joints. Regular exercise and seeking advice from a dietitian can help to optimise your weight control.

## Regaining activity levels

We should all aim to do 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five times a week. Getting started with activity can sometimes seem overwhelming but it is important to remember that exercise can be broken down into small portions such as three lots of 10 minutes during the day, to make a total of 30 minutes. Pacing your activities into manageable chunks and resting as necessary will help with symptoms of fatigue. Aiming to exercise at a moderate intensity means you should feel slightly breathless but still be able to hold a conversation.

## Further support

Many women feel unsure about returning to sporting activities or joining a gym after completing treatments. Here is a list of suggestions that might help you get started with increasing your activity levels.



- **Spring Into Action** – a one-off diet and physical activity advice clinic run at The Royal Marsden which can offer personalised advice tailored to your needs. Please ask your physiotherapist for further details.
- **Yoga** – free yoga sessions are available to any patient who has received treatment at The Royal Marsden. Yoga can help to reduce stress, aid relaxation, maintain fitness, suppleness, muscle tone and energise both body and mind. Please ask your physiotherapist for further details.
- **Tai Chi** – exercise sessions focus on body awareness, deep breathing and weight bearing movements. Research suggests this has beneficial effects on mood, fatigue, sleep quality, bone mineral density, balance, reducing stress and pain reduction. Qualified Tai Chi instructors in your area can usually be found online.
- **Pilates** – focuses on slow controlled movements that concentrate on developing central core stability which can help to improve posture and minimise the risk of injury. Qualified pilates instructors in your area can usually be found online.
- **GP exercise referral schemes** – your GP may be able to refer you to a local scheme where you can receive a confidential assessment and consultation with a fitness instructor. Following an 8-10 week fitness program can give you the confidence, knowledge, motivation and skills to exercise independently.
- **Exercise DVD** – you may prefer to exercise in the comfort of your own home and if you are new to exercising, both The Royal Marsden and Macmillan have produced their own exercise DVD's specifically for patients who are recovering from cancer treatments. Please ask your physiotherapist for further details.
- Activity does not necessarily have to be taking part in a sport but can include housework and gardening. Taking the stairs instead of the lift or walking instead of driving short distances can make a real difference to your fitness levels.

- Macmillan, Breast Cancer Care and Cancer Research UK are all useful resources for people living with the side effects of cancer treatments. Further information regarding exercise can be found on their websites:

*[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/breast-cancer](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/breast-cancer)*

*[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/)*

*[www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/breast-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/breast-cancer)*

## Contact details

If you have any questions about the information in this leaflet, please contact:

### **Breast Care Physiotherapist**

Chelsea      020 7808 2821 (answer phone)

Sutton      020 8661 3098 (answer phone)

If you continue to struggle with symptoms despite the exercises and advice in this leaflet, please contact your breast care nurse or oncologist for further advice.

## References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

Telephone: Chelsea 020 7811 8438 / 020 7808 2083

Sutton 020 8661 3759 / 3951

Email: [patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk)

No conflicts of interest were declared in the production of this booklet.

Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

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[royalmarsden.org](http://royalmarsden.org)

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