

Photo: Comstock.com



Water Exercise

Questions & Answers With Aquatic Specialist Mary Essert

It is never too late to start aquatic exercise. For persons with fibromyalgia (FM), it offers a fun and relaxing environment with very low impact on joints and muscles. Below are some basic tips.

Remember, Safety First!

Never go into a pool or hot tub alone. Always have another person along, even if that person stays on the deck.

Q. Do I need to be able to swim?

A. You do not have to know how to swim, however, a certain level of comfort in the water makes a safe environment in which to exercise. Ideal depth for water walking is somewhere between your belly button and your nipples. You will soon establish the most comfortable depth for your water exercise. Trunk stability and balance will help you determine this.

Q. Is it okay to do regular swimming (i.e., swimming laps, etc.) in addition to aquatic exercise?

A. Swimming is a wonderful lifetime sport. Use good judgment about the strokes you use. For example, if you have pain in your neck, you may want to avoid front crawl and breaststroke and stay with sidestroke or backstroke. If your knees are painful, avoid the breaststroke kick and stay with a flutter kick.

Q. Will my hair get wet doing this kind of water exercise? I am often too tired to wash my hair.

A. Your hair does not need to get wet doing vertical (standing) exercise either in shallow or deep water.

Q. Do I need special equipment?

A. No, it is better to use your own body first. At some point, you may wish to graduate to some strengthening work using surface equipment such as gloves or paddles. You are in charge of listening to your body. Less is more at the beginning.

Q. I get cold in swimming pools. How can I do water exercise? Is there special swim wear?

A. Being chilled is not good. Use a robe when entering and exiting the pool area, and yes, there is swim wear available. Rash shirts and wet suits are available in dive shops. There are also fine vendors who work with the water fitness/therapy industry to keep us warm. Here are several:

WaterWear Inc., Phone: (800) 321-7848,
www.h2owear.com

(continued)

The Wet Wrap, D.K. Douglas Co. Inc., Phone: (800) 334-9070, www.wetwrap@wetwrap.com

Adolph Kiefer & Assoc., Phone: (800) 323-4071, www.kiefer.com

Sally Stanton Water Warmups, Phone: (888) 890-8044, www.more@waterwarmups.com

Q. Where can I find out about classes?

A. Contact your local Arthritis Foundation, Parks and Recreation Department, YMCA, YWCA, JCC, Boys and Girls Clubs, school district or local colleges/universities (ask about arthritis classes and water temperature), fitness centers, hospital wellness centers, or therapy clinics.

Q. Some FM patients find that cold therapies work better for them than warm therapies. In fact, nowadays some physical therapists recommend cold packs to patients where they once would have recommended moist heat packs. Is it therefore okay for an individual to perform water exercises in an outdoor pool (not in winter) or indoor pool without regulated temperature?

A. Personal preference and tolerance determine the answer. Most persons with FM prefer warmer water temperature between 88-90 degrees F. This is popular for low to moderate exercise. It is safe to exercise aerobically at 88 degrees considering air temperature and circulation, and of course, any pre-existing medical conditions you might have. I worked with FM patients in an 84-degree pool for 10 years, and we wore protective clothing. The theory here was that comfortable movement was worth the trouble. Those who couldn't tolerate it, didn't come. (My preference is 88 degrees F.)

Q. How many times a week should I take these classes, and how long is each lesson?

A. For starters, you should do aquatic exercise that is appropriate for you 2 to 4 times per week. Begin with 15 to 30 minutes per session and increase to an hour when ready. Remember comfort

and tolerance are your guides. FM persons should aim for a minimum of 20 minutes of aerobic work (60-80% MHR based on the Borg Perceived Exertion Scale) as many days as possible. I, for example, don't sleep well without my water exercise 7 days a week.

Q. How long before I will see the difference in my energy level and my fitness level?

A. That depends on your condition and your ambition. I wouldn't look for results until after several weeks of adherence to your aquatics program. Remember, it took a long time to become deconditioned. It takes a while to turn that around. Journal your progress to give yourself some proof (e.g., I did the grocery shopping this week without being totally exhausted).

Q. I have not exercised recently. Will this cause my FM to flare?

A. Maybe. Start slowly, and listen to your body. Stay underwater with your movements. Avoid moving through any new pain. Stay warm and take a nap when you return home if you need to.

Q. Customarily, a medical clearance is necessary before starting an exercise program, and a fitness evaluation as well. Do you require/recommend either one, or both, before starting a water exercise program?

A. This depends on the person, his/her condition, and the facility she chooses in which to participate. For physical therapy, an assessment is required, and the persons who work in the water one-on-one follow a particular program based on a doctor's prescription.

When a FM patient signs up to attend an arthritis class or a regular low-to-moderate level water fitness class, the paperwork depends on the facility. Some facilities recommend a health information form and use that to guide their staff. These forms are treated as confidential information but are kept accessible to the instructor. Good judgment on the part of the individual with FM certainly dic-

tates communication with the instructor and perhaps a visit to a class to observe before joining. You may want to communicate with your health care provider as well. If no paperwork is required, it is your job to educate the instructor. The *FM Monograph* booklet available from the National Fibromyalgia Partnership is a great source.

Mary B. Essert, B.A., ATRIC, has been involved in the aquatic industry since 1949. Her leadership and experience in teaching swimming, water fitness, and therapeutic intervention techniques are internationally recognized. Adapted Aquatics has brought her to more active involvement and employment in rehabilitation and therapy. She serves as a trainer for the Arthritis Foundation, Red Cross WSI, AAHPERD Adapted Aquatics, and she holds many instructor certifications from organizations including AEA, USWFA, Medical Health & Fitness Cancer Wel-Fit, and the MS Society. She is an assistant teacher for Watsu(R) and a Jahara practitioner.



Photo: Courtesy of Mary Essert

Mary Essert demonstrates a Crossover Shoulder Stretch

She was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from AEA and received the Aquatic Therapy and Rehab Institute (ATRI) Aquatic Therapy Professional of the Year Award for 2002. She was recognized in *Who's Who in Aquatic Leadership in the U.S.* for the past five years.

Her seminars, workshops, videos, and book on older adults, rheumatic conditions, fibromyalgia, breast cancer, and warm water bodywork have helped many instructors and individuals. She is currently employed by Conway Regional Health Systems and Conway Therapy Services in Conway, AR, and she travels widely to educate others about the benefits of aquatic exercise. Her new CD on Post-Polio Aquatic Exercise will be available this spring. She may be reached via her website: www.maryessert.com, or by email at: messert@mindspring.com. You may also write to her: c/o NFP, Inc., P.O. Box 160, Linden, VA 22642-0160 USA.