

Script – Print – Splashing into aquatic therapy

The harsh reality of a typical Midwestern winter is upon us. While mounds of snow and brutal temperatures sit outside our door, that's no excuse to not take care of physical ailments that can benefit from aquatic physical therapy.

Working with an experienced therapist in a pool, patients who require aquatic therapy may experience ease of movement without pain, relaxing muscles, increased strength and better endurance – all of which can help the spine and joints and improve lung performance.

Nicole Bartoszek is a physical therapist assistant with OSF HealthCare. She says therapy in a pool offers more buoyancy, which means less pressure on the joints. And warm water can help when it comes to relaxation and decreasing blood pressure.

"The biggest benefit of water exercise is there's hydrostatic pressure when you're submerged into the water," says Bartoszek. "So, what that does is increase blood flow to the muscles and increases blood flow to the joints which also helps with ease of exercise."

There are many people who benefit from water therapy including stroke patients, people with balance or gait issues and children experiencing sensory processing disorders.

Bartoszek sees many people who are dealing with mobility, pain, weakness and cardiovascular function issues. Another benefit to aquatic therapy is patients do not have to worry about getting injured while falling, which can be an issue during land therapy for those with balance issues.

"The people who benefit the most from aquatic therapy have bad arthritis and have a hard time with weight bearing issues on land. In the pool they're more buoyant and that can take more pressure off their joints," she says. "Some people with mild COPD or blood pressure, hypertension issues can benefit from increased cardiac output from the hydrostatic pressure on the body. It also can help with swelling and edema. We also work with people who are trying to return to sports using plyometric exercises, which are easier on the joints in the water."

Among the most common exercises offered in aquatic therapy are gentle stretching and floating exercises, strengthening work, balance training and cardiovascular conditioning.

And people are seeing good results. One [study](#) published in *JAMA Network Open* found patients with low back pain reported better outcomes with aquatic therapy than other modalities when it came to pain relief, better sleep and improved quality of life.

Bartoszek adds that aquatic therapy is a great start for people who want to continue water exercise. Check your local resources for group aquatic classes that are available in your community.

"It's important to do group therapy to have that support system," she says. "People like to communicate and visit and socialize while they're in the pool and have that camaraderie when they're exercising in a relaxing environment."

The water temperature is also important. To be classified as a licensed therapy pool, the temperature should be at least 90 degrees.

And you don't have to be a world-class swimmer to take part in aquatic therapy. Licensed therapy programs have CPR trained therapists on hand who are in the pool with patients.

"It's a good medium to work in and especially with people who are high risk for falls and balance because you have the buoyancy of the water to help with that," says Bartoszek. "And if there's someone who has a really hard time or is in pain, and has a hard time exercising on land, a pool is a good alternative because it's so much easier on the joints and the warm water helps with relaxation and pain."

For more information about how aquatic therapy can benefit you, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).