

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a form of arthritis that damages the cartilage in joints. Finger and weight-bearing joints (knees, hips and spine) are the joints most often affected. It is the most common type of arthritis. Many people develop osteoarthritis in one or more joints as they get older.

Normal joints

A joint is where two moving bones come together. A joint is made up of:

- **cartilage:** a strong, smooth protective lining on the end of each bone
- **joint capsule:** a tough covering that surrounds the joint and holds it together
- **synovial membrane:** a thin layer of tissue that lines the inside of the joint capsule
- **synovial fluid:** a fluid made by the synovial membrane that lubricates the joint
- **muscles, ligaments, and tendons:** hold the bones in place and allow the joint to bend and move.

Joints protect bone ends from wearing away and act as shock absorbers.

Osteoarthritis

In a joint affected by osteoarthritis, the cartilage breaks down and wears away. Bits of bone or cartilage can break off and float around inside the joint space, and lumps of bone (spurs) may grow on the ends of the bones. As the damage gets worse, the joint loses its smooth movement. The space between the bones becomes narrower and the bones may rub against each other, causing pain. The joint may change in size and shape.



Signs and symptoms

Osteoarthritis usually develops slowly over months or years. The first sign of osteoarthritis is often joint pain during or after physical activity.

Some symptoms of osteoarthritis are:

- joint pain (cold weather and moving the joint usually make the pain worse)
- stiff joints
- reduced joint movement (you can't bend the joint as much as before)
- cracking sounds or a grating feeling in the joint
- bony lumps around the joint
- joint swelling.

The symptoms of osteoarthritis vary from person to person. Some people have mild osteoarthritis that does not get worse over time. Other people have severe osteoarthritis, which can make it hard for them to work or carry out normal everyday activities. Pain and disability can make them feel exhausted, anxious and depressed.

Managing osteoarthritis

There is no cure for osteoarthritis but it can be managed. You need to care for your joints, and may need to make some lifestyle changes and use mechanical aids. Medicines can also help. Some people need joint surgery (e.g. a joint replacement).

Self care

Joint awareness

Straining or injuring a joint (e.g. during sport or at work) can increase the risk of osteoarthritis in that joint. Proper treatment of injuries and protecting your joints during physical activity can help to limit or avoid osteoarthritis later in life.

Exercise

- Regular exercise is an important part of managing osteoarthritis. It can improve your mood, reduce pain and make your joints more flexible. It can also make your muscles, bones and ligaments stronger.
- Warm water (e.g. a heated pool) can help you move more easily.

Ask a doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or Arthritis Australia about suitable exercises.

Weight control

Keep to a healthy weight to limit the load on your weight-bearing joints (e.g. hips and knees). Exercise regularly and have a healthy diet. Eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrain/wholemeal foods, protein-rich foods (e.g. nuts, lean meats, fish, eggs, beans) and low-fat dairy foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

Rest and joint care

- Learn when your body needs to rest.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques - they may help to reduce anxiety and ease pain.
- Keep a good posture to reduce stress on joints and muscles.

- Avoid sitting in the same position for too long.
- Wear suitable footwear - shoe inserts and cushioned shoes can help to reduce joint stress. Ask a physiotherapist or podiatrist for advice.
- Walking sticks, braces and splints can protect and support joints.
- Mechanical devices and other aids (e.g. hand rails, tap turners, reaching aids) can help with everyday living.

Ask an occupational therapist or the Independent Living Centres Australia organisation about splints, aids and devices.

Pain relief

- Heat therapy (e.g. hot packs, warm baths) can help joint pain and stiffness.
- Cold therapy (e.g. cold packs) can help joint pain and swelling.
- Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) can help joint pain and stiffness.

Ask a doctor or physiotherapist about how and when to use heat, cold and TENS therapy.

Medicines

A number of different medicines can help the symptoms of osteoarthritis. A doctor or pharmacist can advise on the best medicines for you, and how and when to use them.

Paracetamol is a pain-relieving medicine that can reduce osteoarthritis pain without causing serious side effects.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (e.g. diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen, celecoxib, meloxicam) can reduce pain, joint stiffness and joint swelling. They are available in oral forms (tablets, capsules, mixtures) and topical forms (creams and gels). Some are available without a doctor's prescription. Oral NSAIDs must be used exactly as directed, to reduce the risk of serious side effects.

Opioids (e.g. codeine, tramadol, oxycodone, buprenorphine, fentanyl) are morphine-like pain relievers that can reduce severe pain. They are available as tablets and skin patches. Opioids must be prescribed by a doctor.

Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatory medicines that can be injected into a joint. They must be prescribed by a doctor.

Complementary medicines (e.g. glucosamine, chondroitin) may help some symptoms of osteoarthritis.

Liniments, capsaicin cream and heat rubs may help to reduce pain and joint stiffness.

For more information

Arthritis Australia

Phone: 1800 011 041

Website: www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Independent Living Centres Australia

Phone: 1300 885 886

Website: www.ilcaustralia.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS MedicineWise

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI
leaflets

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from
anywhere in Australia

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

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