

Arthritis

Arthritis is a name for a group of conditions affecting the joints. There are more than 100 forms of arthritis. In Australia nearly one in five people has arthritis. The most common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and gout.

Anyone can get arthritis, including children and young people. It can affect people from all backgrounds, ages and lifestyles.

Symptoms of arthritis

Arthritis affects people in different ways, and each type of arthritis will have specific symptoms. However common symptoms across the many types of arthritis are:

- Pain
- Swelling in a joint
- Redness and warmth in a joint
- Stiffness or reduced movement of a joint
- General symptoms such as fatigue and feeling unwell.

Sometimes these symptoms are called 'rheumatism'. Rheumatism isn't a disorder in itself, but the word is often used to describe any sort of joint or muscle pain.

The importance of diagnosing arthritis correctly

As there are so many different types of arthritis, it is important that you seek a diagnosis if you suspect you have the condition. Treatment, especially medication, can differ greatly between different forms of arthritis. A correct diagnosis can ensure you get the most appropriate care.

Speak to your local doctor about your symptoms. They will take your history, examine your joints and may order an x-ray and some tests. If appropriate, your doctor will refer you to a specialist, often a rheumatologist, for diagnosis and specialised management of your condition.

Managing arthritis

Living with arthritis can be different from person to person. For each individual, symptoms can vary from day to day. Treatment and management options vary with the type of arthritis, its severity and the parts of the body affected. There is no cure for arthritis. Management options can include medical treatment and medication, physiotherapy, exercise and self-management techniques.

Your arthritis healthcare team

A range of health professionals may be able to help you in managing your arthritis. These include:

- Registered medical doctor (GP)
- Rheumatologist
- Physiotherapist
- Dietitian
- Occupational therapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Podiatrist
- Pharmacist.

Medications for arthritis

Different types of arthritis are treated by different medications which aim to reduce pain and inflammation. Other medications can slow down damage to joints in some types of arthritis. The medicines your doctor prescribes will depend on your type of arthritis and the severity of your symptoms.

It is important to discuss any medication or treatment for arthritis with your doctor or rheumatologist so they can monitor your treatment.

The most common medications include:

- **Painkillers (analgesics)** – pain-relieving medicines have no effect on the joint or your arthritis. They simply stop you feeling the pain.
- **Creams and ointments** – they can be rubbed into the skin over a painful joint to relieve pain.
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** – these are medicines that treat inflammation, pain and swelling.
- **Corticosteroids and injections into the joint** – if you have severe pain and inflammation in your joints, then your doctor may prescribe a stronger anti-inflammatory medicine called a corticosteroid. These can be taken as tablets or given by injection directly into a joint, muscle or other soft tissue.
- **Disease-modifying medications** – these are used for inflammatory forms of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis.
- **Biological medications** – are new treatments for people with inflammatory forms of arthritis. These drugs work by targeting certain proteins that are overproduced, causing inflammation and damage to bones, cartilage and tissue.

Tips to help you manage arthritis

There are many things you can do to manage your arthritis.

- **Stay active** – physical activity is the key to maintaining muscle strength, joint flexibility and managing your pain. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can help design an individual program for you.
- **Learn ways to manage pain** – there are many strategies you can use to deal with pain. Knowing about these and what works best for you is an important part of living with a chronic condition such as arthritis.
- **Watch your diet** – while there is no diet that can cure arthritis, a healthy and well-balanced diet is the best for general good health. Keeping to a healthy weight is also important as any extra weight puts extra strain on your joints.
- **Protect your joints** – find out about aids, equipment and gadgets that can make tasks easier. An occupational therapist can give you advice on aids, equipment and home modifications.
- **Enrol in a self-management course** – self-management educational programs can help people with arthritis and other chronic conditions to build their skills and confidence to live with the condition. Self-management courses include strategies to help manage pain and fatigue. Arthritis Victoria can provide more information on these courses.
- **Join a peer support group** – dealing with a chronic condition can be isolating. Being able to speak with others who understand your condition can be a great relief. Peer support groups exist around Victoria for people with all different forms of arthritis. Contact Arthritis Victoria for details of your nearest group.
- **Work closely with your healthcare team** – the best way to live well with arthritis is by working closely with all the practitioners that make up your healthcare team.

Where to get help

- Your registered medical doctor (GP)
- Rheumatologist
- Arthritis Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia

- Physiotherapist – to find a physiotherapist visit the Australian Physiotherapy Association
- Exercise physiologist – to find an exercise physiologist visit Exercise and Sports Science Australia.

Things to remember

- Arthritis is a general term that describes problems of the joints, bones and muscles.
- There are more than 100 different forms of arthritis.
- It is important to stay active to keep your joints moving and your muscles strong.
- Live well with arthritis by working closely with your professional healthcare team.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.