

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is one of the most common forms of arthritis. Osteoarthritis commonly develops from the age of 45, although it can occur in younger people. Many of us will develop symptoms as we age.

Joints and osteoarthritis

A joint is the meeting point of two bones to allow movement. Cartilage is the firm cushion found covering the ends on the two bones that acts as a shock absorber and enables the bones to glide smoothly over each other.

The joint is wrapped inside a tough capsule that is filled with synovial fluid. This fluid lubricates the joint and keeps it moving smoothly. In osteoarthritis, the cartilage becomes brittle and breaks down. Some pieces of cartilage may even break away and float around inside the synovial fluid. This can lead to inflammation. Eventually, the cartilage can break down so much that it no longer cushions the two bones.

Symptoms of osteoarthritis

The symptoms of osteoarthritis can vary from one person to the next. Some of the more common symptoms include:

- Stiffness
- Joint pain
- Muscle weakness.

Common sites for osteoarthritis

The most common joints that develop osteoarthritis include:

- Hands – usually the end finger joints
- Spine – in the neck or lower back
- Hips – older people are most at risk
- Knees – might be caused by an old injury.

Risk factors for osteoarthritis

The cause of osteoarthritis is unclear – however, risk factors for its development have been identified. These include:

- A family history of osteoarthritis
- A previous injury or overuse of the joint
- Being overweight.

Diagnosis of osteoarthritis

If you are experiencing joint pain, it is important to see your doctor for a diagnosis. There are many different conditions that cause joint pain, requiring different treatments. Your doctor will generally have an x-ray taken of the painful joint(s) and may refer you to a specialist (rheumatologist) if necessary.

Managing osteoarthritis with exercise

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but the condition can be managed by keeping the joint mobile. Exercising an osteoarthritic joint is important to:

- Maximise the health of the cartilage
- Maintain joint movement
- Improve muscle strength.

As cartilage does not have a blood supply it relies on the synovial fluid moving in and out of the joint to nourish it and take away its wastes.

Keeping the joint mobile with physical activity is one way of improving cartilage health. Exercises that involve moving the joints through their range of movement will also help maintain flexibility that is otherwise lost as a result of the arthritis. Pain associated with the arthritis has a weakening effect on the surrounding muscles. However, by undertaking strengthening exercises, muscle weakness can be reversed. Strong muscles will support sore joints.

Talk to your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist about suitable exercises. A variety of exercise that promotes muscle strength, joint flexibility, improved balance and coordination, and a healthy heart, is encouraged. Warm water exercise and tai chi are suitable exercise programs.

Other considerations for arthritis

Other techniques that can help in the management of osteoarthritis include:

- **Education** – find out about your condition. Arthritis Victoria can provide you with information and self-management courses that support you with your management.
- **Weight management** – controlling weight is important for those who are overweight and have osteoarthritis affecting the weight-bearing joints. Your doctor or dietician may be able to advise you on safe weight loss strategies.
- **Medication** – pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory medications can help, as advised by your doctor.
- **Relaxation techniques** – for example muscle relaxation, meditation or visualisation. These techniques can help manage pain and the difficult emotions, such as anxiety, which are sometimes experienced by people with arthritis.
- **Support** – seek support from others including family, friends, work colleagues and health professionals. A support or self-help group may be another option – contact Arthritis Victoria for details of support groups.
- **Surgery** – to replace hip and knee joints, in cases of advanced osteoarthritis.
- **Patella taping, knee braces and orthotics** – may be useful in the management of knee osteoarthritis. Seek advice from a physiotherapist.
- **Equipment that promotes independence** – there are many specially designed aids and types of equipment available to assist people with painful joints. The design of this equipment, such as large-handled kitchen utensils, reduces the strain on the joints. For more information, speak with an occupational therapist.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Arthritis Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041

Things to remember

- Osteoarthritis is a breakdown of the cartilage inside a joint.
- People over 45 are more at risk, but young people can be affected too.
- Exercise is one of the best ways to manage osteoarthritis.

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

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

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