
Osteoarthritis

Summary

- Osteoarthritis is not an inevitable consequence of ageing and it can be effectively managed. Your active participation in care is essential to achieving improved outcomes.
 - Younger people may also develop osteoarthritis.
 - Osteoarthritis is a chronic disease often associated with joint pain and stiffness, reduced mobility and reduced quality of life.
 - Osteoarthritis can affect any joint in the body.
 - Osteoarthritis should be diagnosed by a health professional.
 - In many cases, imaging (such as x-ray) is not required to make a diagnosis of osteoarthritis.
 - Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is not necessary for the management or diagnosis of osteoarthritis.
 - A better understanding of the disease and how you can actively manage it can improve your outcomes and quality of life.
 - Core components of care include weight and nutritional management, exercise and education.
 - Arthroscopy for knee osteoarthritis is not recommended.
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What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a common condition that affects joints of the body. It causes structural changes within a joint or multiple joints, resulting in **pain** and loss of function. Osteoarthritis is associated with a number of factors, including genetic, mechanical, hormonal and inflammatory factors, and is not just a disease of aging or an 'older persons' disease.

There is a high variability in the level of pain that an individual with osteoarthritis experiences, and it does not often correlate with the degree of change in the joints, such as those seen on x-rays.

Symptoms of osteoarthritis

The symptoms of osteoarthritis can vary from one person to the next and change within the same person over time. Some of the common symptoms include:

- stiffness
- pain associated with movement
- muscle weakness
- joint instability
- reduced range of movement
- sounds within the joints
- feelings of low mood.

Joints affected by osteoarthritis

Any joint in the body can be affected by osteoarthritis. Most commonly, it is the larger weight-bearing joints, such as knees and hips, that are most affected.

Risk factors for osteoarthritis

Evidence suggests that risk factors for osteoarthritis include:

- being overweight or **obese**
 - a previous significant injury to the joint
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- increasing age
- repetitive movements associated with an occupation.

Diagnosis of osteoarthritis

If you are experiencing joint pain, it is important to see your health professional for a diagnosis and development of a management plan. Many different conditions can cause joint pain and they require different treatments.

Plain x-rays are sometimes used to confirm the diagnosis of osteoarthritis or to assist with planning interventions, such as surgery. A magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is rarely required.

Management of osteoarthritis

If you have osteoarthritis it is important that your condition is monitored by a health professional, and that they create an osteoarthritis management plan for you. In most cases a management plan that focuses on non-surgical and non-pharmacological care is best. It is critical that the management plan supports you to take an active role.

It is also important that you have an understanding of osteoarthritis and how to manage it appropriately. This involves being informed about:

- your condition – including information about interventions that have been shown not to work and those for which there is no clear evidence for effectiveness
- living with and managing osteoarthritis
- **managing pain**
- pain relieving medication
- how to adopt a healthy lifestyle – it is important that you maintain general fitness levels, reduce sedentary life style habits and **eat healthily**
- the importance of **managing your weight** – people who are overweight or obese are strongly encouraged to lose weight, and should be supported in doing so
- exercises or physical activity that will be of specific help to you.

Managing osteoarthritis pain

If you have osteoarthritis it is important to know about how to manage your pain, including how to pace and plan your daily activities.

Some people may have a specific pain management plan created for them, or be referred to a pain management clinic.

Talk to your health care professional about pain relieving medication, including the benefits and potential risks.

Use of pain relieving medication to manage osteoarthritis focuses on improving symptoms, not changing the disease process itself. There are different medications that are available depending on your symptoms and other medical conditions.

It is important to note that pain associated with osteoarthritis may change over time, which will influence what medication is required. Opiate-based medications are generally not required as part of an effective osteoarthritis management plan.

Exercise programs for osteoarthritis

Your health care professional will create a structured exercise program for you after your osteoarthritis is diagnosed.

Appropriate exercise may include strengthening, stretching and a balance program that could be individual or group-based. Exercises can be performed on land or in water.

If any exercises feel uncomfortable, talk to the healthcare professional who is managing your program to make sure you are doing them properly and that they are appropriate for you. The aim is to start with what is achievable for you, and build up your program to challenge you further over time.

Surgery for osteoarthritis

For some people, surgery may be considered when all other appropriate, non-operative treatments have been tried for a reasonable period of time and there is a significant impact on the quality of life.

Surgery is not required and is not appropriate for many people with osteoarthritis. It is usually only offered if there is a good chance that it will decrease pain and improve function.

The most common surgery for osteoarthritis is a total joint replacement. You should be informed when surgery should be considered, what it involves, its benefits and risks? Arthroscopy is not recommended for people with osteoarthritis.

Where to get help

- Your doctor or other medical specialist
- Your physiotherapist, or other allied health professional
- **Musculoskeletal Australia**. National Help Line Tel. **(03) 8531 8000** or **1800 263 265**

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