



OSTEOARTHRITIS

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis, especially among older people. It affects more than one million Australians. People with osteoarthritis usually have joint pain and stiffness. Despite these challenges, most people with osteoarthritis can lead active and full lives. Learning self-care and having a good health attitude can make all the difference to how you feel. Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about which treatments are best for you. Remember you can enjoy good health despite having the disease.

Normal joints

Joints (the place where two moving bones come together) are designed to protect bone ends from wearing away and to act as shock absorbers. A joint is made up of:

- **Cartilage** – a hard but slippery coating on the end of each bone.
- **Joint capsule** - a tough covering that holds all the bones and other joint parts together.
- **Synovium** – a thin membrane inside the joint capsule.
- **Synovial fluid** – a fluid that lubricates the joint.
- **Muscles, ligaments, and tendons** - keep the bones stable and allow the joint to bend and move.

What is osteoarthritis?

The surface layer of cartilage breaks down and wears away. This causes bones under the cartilage to rub together, causing pain, swelling, and loss of movement. Over time, the joint may lose its normal shape. Also, bone spurs may grow on the edges of joints. Bits of bone or cartilage can break off and float inside the joint space. This causes more pain and damage.

How do you know if you have osteoarthritis?

Usually, osteoarthritis comes on slowly. Early in the disease, joints may ache after physical work or exercise. Osteoarthritis can occur in any joint. Most often it affects the hands, hips, knees, or spine.

Osteoarthritis affects each person differently. In some people, it progresses more quickly; in others, the symptoms are more serious. We do not yet know what causes the disease, but a combination of factors in the body and in the environment may be the cause. Also, diet, weight, and stresses on the joints affect the disease and how a person reacts to it.

Signs of osteoarthritis

- Pain in a joint.
- Stiffness after getting out of bed.
- Swelling or tenderness in a joint.
- A crunching feeling or sound of bone rubbing on bone.

How can osteoarthritis be diagnosed?

No single test can diagnose osteoarthritis. A doctor will take into account the following:

- **Clinical history** – the doctor begins by asking for a description of the symptoms, and when and how the condition started.
- **Physical examination** – the doctor will check on general health. Joints which are bothering you will be examined.
- **X-rays** – the doctor may take an x-ray to show such things as cartilage loss, bone damage, and bone spurs.
- **Other tests** – the doctor may order blood tests to find out the cause of the symptoms. Another common test includes 'joint aspiration,' where fluid is drawn from the joint for examination.



How is osteoarthritis treated?

Osteoarthritis treatment plans often include ways to manage pain and help improve lifestyle. This can involve exercise, rest and joint care, pain relief, weight control, medication and in some cases surgery.

Self care

Exercise

- Exercise can improve mood and outlook, decrease pain, increase flexibility, and strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments.
- Water exercise is of particular benefit as the warmth and buoyancy of the water makes movement much easier.

Rest and joint care

- You must learn to recognise your body's signals, and know when to stop or slow down. This prevents pain caused by over-exercising.
- Some patients find that relaxation techniques improve symptoms.
- Canes or sticks and splints to protect joints. They also keep the joint in proper position during sleep or activity. Splints must be used for limited periods because joints and muscles need to be exercised to prevent stiffness and weakness. An occupational therapist or a doctor can help find a properly fitting splint.

Pain relief

- Warm towels, hot packs, or a warm bath or shower to apply moist heat to the joint can relieve pain and stiffness.
- Cold packs (a bag of ice or frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel) can relieve pain or numb the sore area. (Check with a doctor or physical therapist to find out if heat or cold is the best treatment.)
- Water therapy in a heated pool or whirlpool may also relieve pain and stiffness.
- For osteoarthritis in the knee, patients may wear insoles or cushioned shoes to redistribute weight and reduce joint stress.

Weight control

- Weight loss can reduce stress on weight-bearing joints and limit further injury. A dietician can help patients develop healthy eating habits.

Medicines

- Paracetamol is used for the effective relief of pain and discomfort associated with osteoarthritis
- NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) — Many NSAIDs are used to treat osteoarthritis. You can buy some over-the-counter, others need a prescription. These drugs work to reduce inflammation or swelling and relieve pain.
- 'Coxib' are a newer class of NSAIDs available on prescription, e.g. rofecoxib (vioxx), celecoxib (celebrex).
- Topical pain-relieving creams, rubs, and sprays can sometimes be effective.
- Corticosteroids - powerful anti-inflammatory medicines. Corticosteroids are usually injected into affected joints to relieve pain temporarily. This is a short-term measure, not recommended more than two or three times per year.

Be sure to discuss every medication you take with your doctor and pharmacist.

Self care is essential to successfully managing the pain and disability of osteoarthritis and will also help you enjoy a better quality of life.

Other relevant fact cards:

- *Exercise and the Heart*
- *Weight & Health*

Contact:

A **doctor** – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book

Osteoarthritis Australia in your state Tel.: 1800 011 041

A **Self Care pharmacy** – locate telephone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer

In case of poisoning, phone the **Poisons Information Centre** on 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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