

Overview

Arthritis is a common condition that causes pain and inflammation in a joint.

In the UK, millions of people have arthritis or other, similar conditions that affect the joints.

Arthritis affects people of all ages, including children.

Types of arthritis

Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis are the 2 most common types of arthritis.

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis in the UK.

It most often develops in people in their mid-40s or older.

It's also more common in women and people with a family history of the condition.

But it can occur at any age as a result of an injury or be associated with other joint-related conditions, such as gout or rheumatoid arthritis.

Osteoarthritis initially affects the smooth cartilage lining of the joint. This makes movement more difficult than usual, leading to pain and stiffness.

Once the cartilage lining starts to roughen and thin out, the tendons and ligaments have to work harder.

This can cause swelling and the formation of bony spurs called osteophytes.

Severe loss of cartilage can lead to bone rubbing on bone, altering the shape of the joint and forcing the bones out of their normal position.

The most commonly affected joints are those in the:

- hands
- spine
- knees
- hips

[Find out more about osteoarthritis](#)

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is less common than osteoarthritis.

It often starts when a person is between 30 and 50 years old. Women are more likely to be affected than men.

In rheumatoid arthritis, the body's immune system targets affected joints, which leads to pain and swelling.

The outer covering (synovium) of the joint is the first place affected.

This can then spread across the joint, leading to further swelling and a change in the joint's shape. This may cause the bone and cartilage to break down.

People with rheumatoid arthritis can also develop problems with other tissues and organs in their body.

Find out more about rheumatoid arthritis

Other types of arthritis and related conditions

- ankylosing spondylitis – a long-term inflammatory condition that mainly affects the bones, muscles and ligaments of the spine, leading to stiffness and joints fusing together. Other problems can include the swelling of tendons, eyes and large joints
- cervical spondylosis – also known as degenerative osteoarthritis, cervical spondylitis affects the joints and bones in the neck, which can lead to pain and stiffness
- fibromyalgia – causes pain in the body's muscles, ligaments and tendons
- lupus – an autoimmune condition that can affect many different organs and the body's tissues
- gout – a type of arthritis caused by too much uric acid in the body. This can be left in joints (usually affecting the big toe), but can develop in any joint. It causes intense pain, redness and swelling
- psoriatic arthritis – an inflammatory joint condition that can affect people with psoriasis
- enteropathic arthritis – a form of chronic inflammatory arthritis associated with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), the 2 main types being ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. The most common areas affected by inflammation are the lower limb joints and the spine
- reactive arthritis – this can cause pain and swelling of the joints, sore eyes and extreme tiredness. It develops shortly after an infection of the gut, bowel or throat
- secondary arthritis – a type of arthritis that can develop after a joint injury and sometimes occurs many years afterwards
- polymyalgia rheumatica – a condition that almost always affects people over 50 years of age, where the immune system causes muscle pain and stiffness, usually across the shoulders and tops of the legs. It can also cause joint inflammation

Symptoms of arthritis

There are lots of different types of arthritis.

The symptoms you experience will vary depending on the type you have.

This is why it's important to have an accurate diagnosis if you have:

- joint pain, tenderness and stiffness
- inflammation in and around the joints
- restricted movement of the joints
- warm red skin over the affected joint
- weakness and muscle wasting

Arthritis and children

Arthritis is often associated with older people, but it can also affect children.

Most types of childhood arthritis are known as juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA).

JIA causes pain and inflammation in 1 or more joints for at least 6 weeks.

Although the exact cause of JIA is unknown, the symptoms often improve as a child gets older, meaning they can lead a normal life.

Oligo-articular JIA (oligoarthritis)

Oligo-articular JIA is the most common type of JIA. It affects up to 4 joints in the body, most commonly in the knees, ankles and wrists.

Oligo-articular JIA often goes away without causing long-term joint damage.

But there's a risk that children with the condition may develop eye problems, so regular eye tests with an eyecare specialist called an ophthalmologist are recommended.

Polyarticular JIA (polyarthritis)

Polyarticular JIA, or polyarthritis, is the second most common type of JIA and affects 5 or more joints.

It can affect a child of any age and may come on suddenly or develop gradually.

The symptoms of polyarticular JIA are similar to the symptoms of adult rheumatoid arthritis.

A child with the condition may also feel unwell and may occasionally have a high temperature of 38C or above.

Systemic onset JIA

Systemic onset JIA begins with symptoms such as a fever, rash, a lack of energy and enlarged glands. Later on, joints can become swollen and inflamed.

Like polyarticular JIA, systemic onset JIA can affect children of any age.

Enthesitis-related arthritis

Enthesitis-related arthritis is a type of juvenile arthritis that often affects the joints of the leg and spine, causing inflammation where the tendons attach to the bone.

It can cause stiffness in the neck and lower back in the teenage years.

It's also linked to a painful eye condition called acute uveitis.

Find out more

Versus Arthritis: juvenile idiopathic arthritis

Treating arthritis

There's no cure for arthritis, but there are many treatments that can help slow it down.

Osteoarthritis treatments include lifestyle changes, medicines and surgery.

Treatment for rheumatoid arthritis aims to slow the condition's progress and minimise joint inflammation. This helps prevent joint damage.

Treatments include medicine, physiotherapy and surgery.

Information:

Self-refer for treatment

If you have arthritis, you might be able to refer yourself directly to services for help with your condition without seeing a GP.

To find out if there are any services in your area:

- ask the reception staff at your GP surgery
- check your GP surgery's website
- contact your integrated care board (ICB) – [find your local ICB](#)
- search online for NHS treatment for arthritis near you

Further information, help and support

[Versus Arthritis](#) provides [help and support](#) for people in the UK with arthritis, plus their families and friends.

They have a [free helpline](#) you can call for further information and support on 0800 5200 520, Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm. The helpline is closed from 12pm on the last Friday of every month for training.

You can also [look up arthritis services](#) near where you live.

[Find out more about living with arthritis](#)

Information:

Social care and support guide

If you:

- need help with day-to-day living because of illness or disability
- care for someone regularly because they're ill, elderly or disabled, including family members

Our [guide to care and support](#) explains your options and where you can get support.

Living with arthritis

Living with arthritis isn't easy and carrying out simple, everyday tasks can often be painful and difficult.

However, there are many things you can do to live a healthy lifestyle. A range of services and benefits are also available.

Work

Many people with arthritis want to continue working for many reasons, including better financial security and higher self-esteem.

Improved treatment approaches have helped ensure that many people diagnosed with arthritis can return to work. This is particularly the case if arthritis is diagnosed and treated at an early stage.

You may find work challenging, but your employer should help you with the training and support you need.

Help is also available if your arthritis is so severe that you're unable to work.

[Find out more about the Personal Independence Payment on GOV.UK](#)

[Versus Arthritis: Working with arthritis](#)

Healthy eating

It's very important to eat a healthy, balanced diet if you have arthritis. Eating healthily will give you all the nutrients you need and help you maintain a healthy weight.

Your diet should consist of a variety of foods from all 5 food groups. These are:

- fruit and vegetables
- starchy foods – such as bread, rice, potatoes and pasta
- meat, fish, eggs and beans
- milk and dairy foods
- foods containing fat and sugar

[Read more about how to have a healthy, balanced diet](#)

If you're overweight, losing weight can really help you cope with arthritis. Too much weight places excess pressure on the joints in your hips, knees, ankles and feet, leading to increased pain and mobility problems.

[Read more about how you can lose weight using the NHS weight loss plan](#)

Exercise

If your arthritis is painful, you may not feel like exercising. However, being active can help reduce and prevent pain. Regular exercise can also:

- improve your movement and joint mobility
- increase muscle strength
- reduce stiffness
- boost your energy

As long as you do the right type and level of exercise for your condition, your arthritis won't get any worse. Combined with a healthy, balanced diet, regular exercise will help you lose weight and place less strain on your joints. Your GP can recommend the type and level of exercise that's right for you.

[Versus Arthritis: Exercising with arthritis](#)

Joint care

If you have arthritis, it's important to look after your joints to avoid further damage. For example, try to reduce the stress on your joints while carrying out everyday tasks like moving and lifting.

To help protect your joints (particularly if you have arthritis):

- use larger, stronger joints as levers – for example, take the pressure of opening a heavy door on your shoulder rather than on your hand
- use several joints to spread the weight of an object – for example, use both hands to carry your shopping or distribute the weight evenly by using a rucksack
- don't grip too tightly – grip as loosely as possible or use a padded handle to widen your grip

[Versus Arthritis: Managing your pain](#)

[Versus Arthritis: Joint care](#)

It's also important to avoid sitting in the same position for long periods of time and to take regular breaks so you can move around.

[Read more about good posture and how to sit correctly](#)

At home

If you have arthritis, carrying out tasks around the home can be a challenge. However, making some practical changes to your home and changing the way you work should make things easier.

Practical tips that could help include:

- keeping things in easy reach
- using a hand rail to help you get up and down the stairs
- using long-handled tools to pick things up or to clean
- fitting levers to taps to make them easier to turn
- using electric kitchen equipment, such as tin openers, when preparing food

Versus Arthritis: Living with arthritis

Occupational therapy

An occupational therapist can help if you have severe arthritis that's affecting your ability to move around your home and carry out everyday tasks, such as cooking and cleaning.

They can advise about equipment you may need to help you live independently.

Depending on the exact nature of your condition, your GP may be able to refer you to an NHS occupational therapist. However, you may need to access this type of therapy through your local council.

[Find your local council on GOV.UK](#)

[Read more about occupational therapy](#)

Arthritis and driving

You only need to inform the DVLA if you have arthritis and use special controls for driving.

[GOV.UK has more information and advice on telling the DVLA about a medical condition or disability](#)

[GOV.UK: Arthritis and driving](#)

Children with arthritis

Make sure your child eats healthily and exercises regularly. They need to maintain a healthy weight because being overweight can put strain on their joints and make their arthritis symptoms worse.

[Read more about how to help your child maintain a healthy weight](#)

Having arthritis shouldn't stop your child leading a normal school life, but keep the school informed about your child's health so they can provide extra support if needed.

[Versus Arthritis: Information for parents of children with arthritis](#)

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/arthriti>s/