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Osteoarthritis

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Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis among older adults. It is also one of the most common causes of physical disability among adults.

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint disease that happens when the tissues that cushion the ends of the bones within the joints break down over time. These changes usually develop slowly and worsen gradually, causing pain, stiffness, and swelling. In some cases, people living with this disease are no longer able to work or perform daily tasks.



There is no way to reverse osteoarthritis, but the symptoms of osteoarthritis can usually be managed with lifestyle changes and medications.

Who is at risk for osteoarthritis?

Anyone can get osteoarthritis, but it is more common as people age. Women are more likely than men to have osteoarthritis, especially after age 50. Other factors that may make it more likely to develop osteoarthritis include:

- Overweight or obesity

- History of injury or surgery to a joint
- Overuse from repetitive movements of the joint
- Joints that do not form correctly
- Family history of osteoarthritis

Each of these risk factors can cause tissues within the joints to break down and lead to osteoarthritis. You can decrease your chances of developing osteoarthritis by changing the risk factors you can control.

Symptoms of osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis symptoms range from stiffness and mild pain to persistent, severe joint pain. Common signs include swelling and tenderness, stiffness after getting out of bed, and a crunching feeling or sound of bone rubbing on bone. However, not everyone with osteoarthritis feels pain.

Osteoarthritis most commonly affects the hands, lower back, neck, and weight-bearing joints such as knees, hips, and feet. Osteoarthritis in any of these joints can lead to physical disability.

Hands. Osteoarthritis of the hands seems to run in families. If you have family members who have had osteoarthritis in their hands, you're at greater-than-average risk of having it, too. Women are more likely than men to have osteoarthritis in the hands. For most women, it develops after [menopause](#). When osteoarthritis involves the hands, small, bony knobs may appear on the end and middle joints (those closest to the nails) of the fingers. Fingers can become enlarged and gnarled, and they may ache or be stiff and numb. The base of the thumb joint also is commonly affected by osteoarthritis.

Knees. The knees are among the joints most commonly affected by osteoarthritis. Symptoms of knee osteoarthritis include stiffness, swelling, and pain, which make it hard to walk, climb, and get in and out of chairs and bathtubs. You may hear a grinding or scraping noise when walking or moving. Over time, the knee may start to buckle.

Hips. The hips are also a common site for osteoarthritis. As with knee osteoarthritis, symptoms of hip osteoarthritis include pain and stiffness of the joint. But sometimes pain is felt in the groin, inner thigh, buttocks, or knees. Osteoarthritis of the hip may limit the ability to move and bend, making daily activities such as dressing and putting on shoes a challenge.

Spine. Osteoarthritis of the spine may show up as stiffness and pain in the neck or lower back. In some cases, arthritis-related changes in the spine can cause pressure on the nerves where they exit the spinal column, resulting in weakness, tingling, or numbness of the arms and legs. In severe cases, these changes can even affect [bladder](#) and bowel function.

Regardless of how osteoarthritis affects an individual, over time, their daily activities may become difficult, such as going up stairs, getting on or off the toilet or in and out of a chair, gripping a pen, or walking across a parking lot. Pain and other symptoms of osteoarthritis may lead a person to feel depressed, get tired easily, or have trouble sleeping. Fortunately, there are treatments to help manage the symptoms.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

To make a diagnosis of osteoarthritis, most health care providers use a combination of methods and tests. Your doctor may:

- Ask about your symptoms and medical history
- Perform a physical examination
- Use X-rays and other imaging tests to look at your joints

- Order laboratory tests to rule out other problems that could be causing your symptoms

If you have questions about your diagnosis, talk to your doctor. Your primary care provider may refer you to a rheumatologist, a doctor who specializes in arthritis and other related conditions.

Osteoarthritis treatment and pain management

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, therefore, doctors focus on treatments to ease your pain, help you move better, and stop the disease from getting worse. Treatment plans often include:

Exercise. A safe, well-rounded [exercise program](#) can reduce joint pain and stiffness and increase [flexibility, muscle strength, and endurance](#). Try stretching and balance exercises as well as low-impact activities such as walking, cycling, swimming, or tai chi. Always talk with your doctor before starting a new exercise program. Remember to start slowly and take the time to adjust to a new level of activity.

Weight control. If you are affected by overweight or obesity, managing your weight can reduce stress on the joints, which may reduce pain, prevent more injury, and increase mobility.

Medication. Over-the-counter [medications](#), including oral pain relievers and arthritis creams, can be helpful. Your doctor may also give you a prescription for a pill or inject a medication directly into the joint to reduce inflammation and pain.

Surgery. If other treatments are not helping and the joint damage is extensive, your doctor may suggest surgery. Surgeries that help treat osteoarthritis include osteotomy, which removes a small piece of bone to relieve pressure on the affected joint, and joint-replacement surgery, which removes a part or all of the damaged joint and replaces it with a plastic, metal, or ceramic joint.

Complementary therapy. Some research shows that [complementary approaches](#), such as massage and acupuncture, may help [relieve osteoarthritis pain](#). Before using other therapies, talk with your doctor about the best options for your treatment.

Take steps to help manage your pain and work toward a better quality of life:

- Try heat and cold treatments to help reduce pain.
- Use a cane or walker to help move around safely. Your doctor or therapist may suggest other devices to help with other daily activities, such as jar openers.
- Practice good posture to reduce pressure on joints.
- Make several trips and keep loads small when bringing in groceries and other purchases.
- Avoid repetitive activities, such as bending at the waist, when possible.
- Reach out online and in your community for support groups.

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Content reviewed: November 15, 2022

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