

# Osteoarthritis (OA)

Information for patients



## What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis. Around 8.75 million people in the UK are affected by OA. The condition is most common in the back, hips, knees and hands. Having OA in one joint does not mean it will also affect other joints.

OA causes changes to the cartilage in your joints (the covering on the end of bones). It is a normal part of the ageing process and most people do not have any problems with their joint that has OA, but some people do. This can be for a lot of reasons, but it is usually related to your lifestyle, diet and the amount of exercise that you do. As you age, your skin can wrinkle and your hair colour can change. Your bones also age, but this does not mean they are damaged or worn out.

OA symptoms can include:

- stiffness
- swelling
- pain or aching
- clicking noises.

OA can have periods of increased pain called flare ups. This does not mean getting worse. Sometimes flare ups can occur through overdoing an activity, or an injury to the joint, for example a fall. Other factors such as stress and weight gain can also cause flare ups. It is helpful to have a plan for when this happens. This is something you could discuss with your physiotherapist or GP.

## How to manage your osteoarthritis

### Exercise

The aim of exercise is to keep you flexible and strong. This should help you to increase your activity levels and do more of what you want to do.

- Aching and discomfort after exercise is normal.
- Exercise to a pain that settles is fine. Forcing into stronger pain can take longer for your symptoms to settle.
- Start with easy exercises, and gradually make them more difficult.
- Set yourself simple goals to aim for (e.g. walking for 30 minutes).

## Planning and pacing day-to-day tasks

Rest is not always helpful, it can cause weakness, joint stiffness and sensitivity.

It is important to:

- stay active
- do exercise/activity
- not become fearful of using your joints
- break down painful tasks into manageable chunks.

## Use whatever helps you to ease your pain

- Pain medication is often used to manage OA. (Speak to your Pharmacist or GP for advice).
- Relaxation strategies can be helpful for managing your symptoms. Try relaxed breathing or meditation to reduce tension.
- Stay positive. We know that if people feel low in mood, they also feel things are more painful.
- Using heat or ice is an easy way to help relieve joint pain:
  - Simple options are to use a hot water bottle or a bag of frozen peas for up to 20 minutes.
  - Heat and ice can burn the skin so always use a towel to cover the area of the skin you are treating with heat/ice. Always check your skin regularly for discolouration or signs of burns.

**\*If you have skin conditions, poor circulation or reduced sensation then you shouldn't use heat/ice unless you have discussed it with a health care professional.**

## Weight, diet and supplements

The more we weigh, the more strain on our joints, so we are likely to feel more pain. Science has shown that weight loss can improve joint problems by up to 50%. If you need further advice regarding weight management, seek advice from your GP, physiotherapist or a dietitian.

It's important we eat a healthy balanced diet. There is no strong research that any particular food or diet can make your joint pain better or worse.

People commonly use supplements such as chondroitin, turmeric or glucosamine to manage joint conditions but there is little evidence that this has any benefit and it is currently not recommended in the national guidelines for the treatment of OA. For healthy living, the NHS recommends that you complete 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise a week and to complete strengthening exercises at least twice a week. In the section below, there are some links to websites that will help you find out more about ways you can start to exercise.

## Other information you might find useful

**ESCAPE pain app:** This free app is designed for people with knee and hip osteoarthritis. It's a six week programme twice a week. If you can't use the app you can use the website: [escape-pain.org](http://escape-pain.org)

**Weight loss:** There are programmes in Leicester/Leicestershire and Rutland that can help you lose weight. One of these is called Active Lifestyle. You can be referred into this service by your GP or physiotherapist or self refer into LEAP for a free NHS weight management program on 0116 222 7154.

### **NHS recommended exercise for adults:**

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/free-fitness-ideas/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/free-fitness-ideas/)

[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/)

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