

# Osteoarthritis

## Arthritis

Arthritis is a term that means you have stiffness, pain and swelling in your joints. The word “arthritis” describes more than 100 rheumatic diseases that affect joints, muscles, bones, tendons and ligaments.

According to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, more than 46 million Americans live with some form of arthritis.

Osteoarthritis is the most common form, affecting about 27 million Americans. The cause of osteoarthritis is unknown.

## Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis causes joint pain and limited motion. Unlike other forms of arthritis, it only affects joints.

This form of arthritis usually is found in older adults. Men often get it before age 45 while women often get it after age 45.

Osteoarthritis is a disease that affects cartilage, the soft tissue that cushions the ends of bones in a joint. This lets the bones glide smoothly.

When the cartilage breaks down or wears away, the bones rub against each other. Small growths of bone (spurs) grow on the ends of the bones. Synovial fluid, which lubricates the cartilage, increases. This process causes swelling and pain.

When your knees, hips, neck or fingers hurt, you tend to not use them as much. This leads to a limited range of motion and weak muscles. That can affect your work, your everyday activities and your responsibilities.

Symptoms of osteoarthritis include:

- swollen joint
- joint pain, heat or redness
- limited movement.

## How To Confirm Osteoarthritis

If you have osteoarthritis symptoms, make an appointment to see your health care provider.

You will be asked about your medical history and what medicines you take. You will also have a physical exam and may have X-rays and other tests.

Your pain is unique. Your health care provider may ask you to rate your pain on a scale of zero (no pain) to 10 (severe pain). You may use words like stinging or burning to describe your pain.

## How To Treat Osteoarthritis

There is no cure for osteoarthritis. But a few changes to your lifestyle can help you manage your osteoarthritis pain. Your health care provider may also prescribe medicine or talk with you about surgery.

**(over)**

- **Exercise.** Exercise can strengthen your muscles, reduce pain, increase your flexibility, lift your mood and keep your weight level. There are 3 types of exercise:
  - Range of motion exercises move your joints and improve your flexibility.
  - Strengthening exercises improve your muscle strength. Strong muscles protect your joints.
  - Aerobic exercises make your heart stronger and control your weight. It may also help reduce joint swelling. Before you start any exercise program, talk with your health care provider first.
- **Rest.** Moving your joints is important, but resting your joints is important, too. Relaxation will help keep you from overworking your joints. You may also find relief from using aids, such as canes, braces or splints.
- **Pain relief.** You may use warm towels, hot packs, or a warm bath to relieve osteoarthritis pain. You may also use a bag of frozen vegetables or ice wrapped in a towel on the sore spot.
- **Medicine.** You may take over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®) or naproxen (Aleve®). These medicines, called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), reduce swelling and relieve pain. Your health care provider may prescribe a medicine that also relieves swelling and pain.

Before taking any medicine, talk with your health care provider about when and how often you should take it, if it has any side effects and if you should take it with any other medicines (prescription or over-the-counter).

## How to Live With Osteoarthritis

- Exercise (swim, walk or do low-impact aerobics) as your health care provider suggests.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Use aids (bathroom rail, splint, cane or brace) to support yourself.
- Get a good night's sleep every night.
- Eat a healthful diet.
- Consider integrative therapies such as massage or acupuncture.
- Follow your pain management plan.

Talk with your health care provider about new arthritis medicines, treatments or both.

**Information adapted from the  
National Institute of Arthritis and  
Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.**