

Osteoarthritis

This sheet has been written for people affected by osteoarthritis. It provides general information to help you understand how osteoarthritis affects you and what you can do to manage it. It also tells you where to find further information and advice.

What is osteoarthritis (OA)?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a condition that affects the joints. In a normal joint, the ends of the bones are covered by a layer of cartilage. Cartilage helps the joint move smoothly and cushions the ends of the bones. In OA, the cartilage breaks down and becomes thin. This leaves the ends of the bones unprotected, and the joint loses its ability to move smoothly. OA mainly affects people over the age of 45, but it can develop in younger people. Osteoarthritis is different to osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition where the bones become fragile and brittle, causing them to break more easily.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of OA vary from person to person. Your symptoms will also depend on which joints are affected. OA tends to come on slowly, over months or even years. The most common symptoms are pain and stiffness of the joints. These feelings are usually worst after resting or not moving the joint for a while. These symptoms may affect your ability to do normal daily activities, such as walking, climbing stairs and opening jars.

What causes it?

In many people there is no clear cause of OA. Research shows there are some things that may put you at more risk of developing OA in certain joints, such as:

- **knees:** being overweight, having a previous knee injury, jobs involving kneeling, climbing and squatting
- **hips:** being overweight, having a previous hip injury, jobs involving lifting heavy loads (including farming)
- **hands:** having a history of OA in the family.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will diagnose OA from your symptoms and a physical examination. An x-ray may show the narrowing and changes in the shape of your joint. However x-rays do not diagnose how much trouble you will have. An x-ray that shows joint damage does not always mean you will have a lot of pain or problems. On the other hand your joint may be very painful despite x-rays being normal. Blood tests are only helpful to rule out other types of arthritis.

What will happen to me?

The impact of OA on your normal activities and lifestyle depends on which joints are affected. However the outlook for most people with OA is very positive. For many people OA will be mild and not cause major problems. OA of the hip and knee rarely causes severe disability but, when it does, surgery to replace joints is often very effective.

Is there a cure for OA?

Currently there is no cure for OA. While there are treatments that can effectively control symptoms, you should be wary of products or therapies that claim to cure OA.

What treatments are there for OA?

Treatments for OA vary depending on which joints are affected and the severity of your condition. There is no way of predicting exactly which treatment will work best for you. Each treatment has its own benefits and risks. Your doctor may need to trial several different treatments before finding the one that is right for you. In general terms, treatment usually includes:

- simple pain relief, using medicines such as paracetamol
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- an exercise program designed to suit your needs
- a weight loss program, if you are overweight
- joint replacement surgery, if your symptoms are no longer controlled with other therapies.

Your local Arthritis Office has information sheets on medicines, physical activity, healthy eating and surgery.

What can I do?

See your doctor for treatment and advice. Your doctor will help you get the right treatment to manage your symptoms. See the *Working with your healthcare team* information sheet.

Learn about OA and play an active role in your treatment. Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

Learn ways to manage pain. See the *Dealing with pain* information sheet.

Stay active. Exercise is strongly recommended for people with OA. It keeps your joints and muscles healthy and flexible and prevents other health problems. You may find it useful to see a physiotherapist or other health professional for advice. See the *Physical activity and Working with your healthcare team* information sheets.

Have a healthy diet. There is no diet that will cure OA, but a well-balanced diet will help you reach and keep to a healthy weight. See the *Healthy eating* information sheet.

Balance your life. Learn about gadgets that make daily tasks easier and how to balance rest and activity. See the *Saving energy* information sheet.

Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. As there is currently no cure for OA, it is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *Arthritis and emotions* information sheet.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Learn about OA and your treatment options.

There are many things you can do to live well with OA.

For more information:

Books *Good living with osteoarthritis* 2006, Arthritis Foundation of America, Atlanta, GA.

Katzenstein, Larry 2005, *Taking charge of arthritis: A practical guide to managing your health and wellbeing*, Readers Digest Australia, Ultimo, NSW.

Bird, Howard et al 2006, *Arthritis: Improve your health, ease pain and live life to the full*, Dorling Kindersley, London.

Lorig, Kate Fries, James 2006, *The arthritis helpbook: A tested self-management program for coping with arthritis and fibromyalgia*, Da Capo Lifelong, Cambridge, MA.

Websites The Arthritis Research Campaign www.arc.org.uk
American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org
Arthritis Foundation (US) www.arthritis.org

Source: A full list of the references used to compile this sheet is available from your local Arthritis Office

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis
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