

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a disease that damages the cartilage in joints. Fingers and load-bearing joints (knees, feet, hips and spine) are the joints most often affected. It is the most common type of arthritis and develops with increasing age in more than half of the adult population.

Normal joints

Joints, where two moving bones come together, are designed to protect bone ends from wearing away and to act as shock absorbers. A joint is made up of:

- **Cartilage** – a hard, slippery, protective coating on the end of each bone
- **Joint capsule** – a tough covering that holds all the bones and other joint parts together
- **Synovium** – a thin membrane lining inside the joint capsule
- **Synovial fluid** – a fluid that lubricates the joint
- **Muscles, ligaments, and tendons** – that keep the bones stable and allow the joint to bend and move.

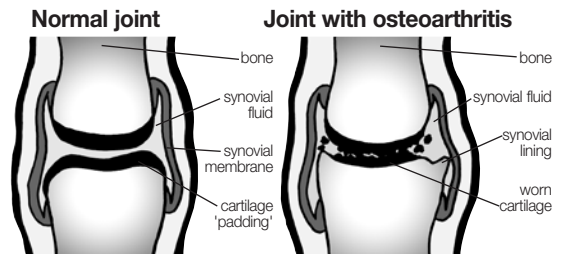
Osteoarthritis

In a joint affected by OA, the cartilage that protects the ends of the bones deteriorates and wears away. As the damage progresses, the joint loses its smooth movement and the bones rub against each other, causing pain and swelling. Over time, the joint may lose its normal shape. Lumps of bone (spurs) may grow on the joint edge. Bits of bone or cartilage can break off and float inside the joint space, causing more damage and pain.

Signs and symptoms

The symptoms of osteoarthritis vary from person to person. OA usually develops slowly and often the first sign is aching joints during or after physical activity. In some people the disease progresses more quickly, in others the symptoms are more severe. Common symptoms include:

- Joint pain, stiffness and swelling
- Bony lumps on the affected joint



- Joint discomfort before or during a weather change
- Weakened muscles around the affected joint.

Managing Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis cannot be cured, but can be well managed. Treatment plans include ways to reduce pain, maintain joint function and manage the tasks of daily living. Joint care, lifestyle changes and mechanical aids are vital to successful management. Medicines can give additional relief. Joint surgery (e.g., a joint replacement) may be needed when symptoms are disabling).

Self care

Learn about OA and ways to manage it.

Pain relief

- Heat therapy (e.g., hot packs, a heated pool) can relieve joint pain and stiffness.
- Cold packs can relieve joint pain and swelling.

Ask a doctor or physiotherapist about how and when to use heat and cold therapy.

Rest and joint care

- Learn to recognise when your body needs to rest.

- Learn and practice relaxation techniques – regular relaxation can improve symptoms.
- Maintain good posture to limit stress on joints and muscles.
- Wear appropriate footwear. Insoles or cushioned shoes can help re-distribute weight and reduce joint stress.
- Walking sticks and splints can protect and support joints.
- Mechanical devices and other aids can help with daily living and household tasks (e.g., hand rails, tap turners, reaching aids).

Ask an occupational therapist or ‘Independent Living Centres Australia’ about splints, aids and devices.

Exercise

- Regular exercise can improve mood, reduce joint pain and stiffness, increase flexibility, and strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments.
- Warm water exercise can be especially helpful as the warmth and buoyancy of the water makes movement easier.

Ask a physiotherapist or doctor about exercise.

Weight control

- Keep to a healthy weight to limit stress on weight-bearing joints. Have a healthy diet, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and whole grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

Joint awareness

Strain or injury to a joint (e.g., sports, occupational) can lead to osteoarthritis in that joint. Proper treatment of injuries and protection of joints can avoid osteoarthritis later in life.

Medicines

- Pain relievers – Paracetamol can relieve OA pain without causing serious side effects. For optimal pain relief, paracetamol needs to be taken *regularly three or four times a day*. Sometimes stronger pain relievers (e.g., codeine, tramadol, oxycodone) are also needed.

- Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) (e.g., ibuprofen, diclofenac, naproxen) can relieve joint pain, swelling and stiffness. Oral NSAIDs (tablets, capsules, mixtures) and topical NSAIDs (creams and gels) are available. Oral NSAID can cause serious side effects, so are best used only if regular paracetamol gives inadequate pain relief. Topical NSAIDs are less likely to cause side effects. Cox-2 inhibitors (e.g., celecoxib, meloxicam) are oral NSAIDs that may cause less gastro-intestinal side effects.
- Glucosamine and Chondroitin – may reduce OA pain and improve joint function without causing serious side effects.
- Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatory medicines that can be injected into a joint to relieve pain and inflammation.
- Hylans can be injected into a joint to increase the lubricant and shock-absorbing properties of the synovial fluid.
- Topical pain-relieving creams, rubs and sprays may be helpful.

A doctor or pharmacist can advise on the best medicines for you.

Related fact cards

- *Pain Relievers*
- *Preventing Falls*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Rheumatoid Arthritis*

For more information

Arthritis Australia – phone 1800 011 041 or website www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

HealthInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Independent Living Centres Australia – phone 1300 885 886 or website www.ilcaustralia.org

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

