

OSTEOARTHRITIS

Patient Information Fact Sheet

›What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. In people affected by this disease the cartilage, or shiny coating that covers the ends of the bones inside the joints, becomes thinned and roughened. The end of each affected bone gradually becomes thicker and grows out sideways, causing the joint to change shape. Fluid may collect inside the joint, causing swelling. The joints most commonly affected are the small joints at the ends of the fingers, the base of the thumb, hips, knees, neck and lower back. Sometimes only the finger joints are involved, or one or two big joints such as the knees or hips.

›What causes osteoarthritis?

No one knows for certain. Osteoarthritis becomes more common with age, but it is not just due to normal wear and tear. Some types of osteoarthritis, such as those affecting the finger joints, tend to run in families. Some people, especially younger people, get osteoarthritis in a joint that has been damaged previously by an injury or operation. Obesity and weak muscles have also been linked to developing osteoarthritis.

›How common is osteoarthritis?

Today, an estimated 27 million Americans live with osteoarthritis. Many of these people have only mild symptoms, in some cases so mild that they don't even know they have the disease. It is estimated that treatment is requested in about one-eighth of cases. Osteoarthritis is slightly more common in women than in men, particularly affecting their knees and hands.

›How will osteoarthritis affect me?

Most people continue living a normal life with their osteoarthritis and do not become disabled by it. But in some people it can be very painful and disabling. The most common symptoms are pain and stiffness in and around the affected joints. The pain is usually worse after exercising or walking, and at the end of the day. Your symptoms will usually change from day to day, so even if your joints are painful today, it does not mean they will stay painful in the future. You may notice that the affected joints are swollen or out of shape and tender when you knock or touch them.

›What tests confirm a diagnosis of osteoarthritis?

Your doctor will examine your joints and may send you for an x-ray. However, the amount of damage seen on the x-ray does not always match the amount of pain and stiffness you are feeling. Most doctors will not perform an x-ray unless you are likely to need an operation. There is no blood test for osteoarthritis, but a blood test can be used to rule out some other types of arthritis.

›How is osteoarthritis treated?

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but there is a lot that can be done to treat the pain and stiffness. Your doctor may recommend physical therapy—a range of different treatments are available to help with the pain. The physical therapist can also teach you exercises to increase the mobility of your joints and strengthen your muscles.

Simple over-the-counter painkillers (eg, **aspirin** [Bayer], **ibuprofen** [Advil], **acetaminophen** [Tylenol]) will usually relieve the pain of osteoarthritis. Some people find anti-inflammatory creams and gels helpful when smaller joints, close to the skin surface, eg, finger joints, are involved. Anti-inflammatory tablets are often helpful when joints flare up. There are many different types of anti-inflammatory medications and your doctor will choose one that he or she thinks is best for you as an individual. Some people may respond well to one anti-inflammatory but not to another. Removing fluid from the joint, or a joint injection can sometimes be very effective in relieving pain and inflammation. If one of your hips or knees is very badly damaged and is causing you a lot of pain, hip or knee replacement surgery will very often alleviate the pain and help you walk comfortably again. These operations are now common and usually have good results.

›Self-help measures

If you are overweight and you have osteoarthritis in a weight-bearing joint such as your hip or knee you should try to lose weight. This will help to reduce the pressure on your joints and avoid further damage. Exercise is important to keep your joints flexible and to keep the muscles strong. Exercises that put less strain on joints, such as swimming and cycling, are particularly helpful. Exercising in warm water is also effective, either in a heated swimming pool or at home in a warm bath. A physical therapist will be able to advise you about the right exercises, but be careful not to overdo it or strain your joints.

- If you are overweight ask your doctor about a weight-reducing diet
- Once you reach your ideal weight, try to maintain it
- Exercise regularly such as swimming or walking

›Further information

Arthritis Foundation: www.arthritis.org

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease:
www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Osteoarthritis

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