

Arthritis & gout

Emergency Department factsheets



What is arthritis?

Arthritis literally means 'inflammation of a joint'. There are many types of arthritis, and most cause pain, swelling, limited movement and stiffness.

In normal bones, the ends are lined by cartilage, which provides 'cushioning' and allows a joint to move freely. The joint is enclosed in a capsule containing fluid, which provides nutrition, and lubricates the joint. Arthritis can occur when there is something wrong with this system.

What causes arthritis?

There are at least 150 types of arthritis. *Osteoarthritis* and *Rheumatoid* arthritis are most common.

- **Osteoarthritis:** Is essentially caused by 'wear and tear', where a breakdown of the cartilage allows the bones to rub together. This can be painful. It usually occurs later in life and affects the hips and knees, although it can also cause problems in the spine, shoulders, hands or any other joint.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis:** Is less common but more severe. It occurs when your immune system attacks the tissue lining the joints, and can lead to pain, swelling, stiffness and joint deformity. The joints most affected are the hands, wrists, shoulders, knees or feet. The cause is not known. Women are affected more than men.

What are the symptoms?

All types of arthritis can result in pain, stiffness and inflammation (a hot, swollen and tender joint). Arthritis can affect you at any age. The severity, location and progression of arthritis can vary greatly from person to person. For many people the cause is not known. You may or may not have another family member with arthritis. Rheumatoid pain is often worse in the morning,

while osteoarthritis results in stiffness at end of day. Gout can occur at any time.

What is gout?

Gout (also called metabolic arthritis) occurs when uric acid crystals form in and around joints, causing sudden and intense pain, redness and swelling. It mainly affects men over 40 and is usually found in the big toe, but can occur in almost any joint. Gout may be inherited, caused by dehydration and bad diet, or due to the side-effects of medication such as fluid tablets. Alcohol and eating rich food can make it worse. Gout may also lead to kidney stones.

Treatment

Blood tests and x-rays may be needed to diagnose the type of arthritis or gout. A sample of fluid (aspirate) may be taken from the joint to test for infection and gout crystals.

There is no cure for arthritis. However, with the right treatment arthritis can be managed. Treatments include anti-inflammatory and anti-arthritis medications, injections and occasionally surgery.

Gout is treated with medication, such as colchicine.

Take all medication as directed and follow the instructions on the packaging.

Home care

There are many ways to make life more comfortable.

- Regular exercise can reduce pain and improve function for most people.
- Do not exercise a painful, swollen or hot joint. If an exercise causes pain, stop.

- A physiotherapist can help you improve your muscle tone, reduce stiffness and keep you mobile. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist about the right exercises for you.
- Maintain a healthy weight to avoid excess pressure and wear on your joints.
- Maintain a good posture at all times.
- Wear supportive footwear.
- There is a wide range of tools that can help with cooking, cleaning and other household chores. These can be found at larger pharmacies or discussed with an occupational therapist.
- Use wheat bags and heat packs, a hot bath or lotions such as Deep Heat to soothe pain and stiffness. Do not use when a joint is hot and swollen.
- There is evidence that glucosamine (available as tablets) can lessen pain and improve function for some people with osteoarthritis.
- Take simple painkillers such as paracetamol if necessary.
- The effectiveness of many herbal remedies and nutritional supplements is not known. Ask your local doctor or health care professional for advice before taking any over-the counter medication.
- Complementary therapies such as massage, electrical stimulation, acupuncture, Tai Chi and homeopathy may increase comfort, although research has not established if there are any real benefits.
- If you suffer from gout, restrict your intake of organ meats, shellfish and tinned fish, and avoid alcohol.

What to expect

Most people lead a normal or near-normal life. Arthritis can be mild and well controlled. It does not always get worse as you get older.

- Rheumatoid arthritis may go into remission for a period of time.

- For some people, arthritis can cause deformed joints, which may lead to stiffness, severe pain and loss of function. Surgery may be helpful for these people.
- Gout may last a few hours to a few days depending on how quickly treatment is started. Some people may need to go on to daily medication to prevent more attacks.

Seeking help

You need to see a doctor or health care professional promptly if you:

- have pain that does not improve with painkillers
- have increased severe joint swelling
- have increased stiffness
- feel generally unwell with a fever
- can not function at home.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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