

Arthritis – Osteoarthritis

Emergency Department factsheets

What is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a degenerative disease that affects the whole joint – including bone, cartilage, ligaments, and muscles – and leads to a gradual decline in health, physical function, and wellbeing. It causes pain, stiffness, immobility, and muscle wasting, and is a leading cause of disability worldwide. OA is more common in women than in men and although it can occur at any age, incidence increases with age. OA can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing. Compared to those without the condition, people with osteoarthritis are:

- 2.7 times as likely to report poor health
- 3.5 times as likely to report very high levels of psychological distress
- 2.8 times as likely to report severe and very severe pain.

There is currently no cure for OA so treatment and management focus on relieving pain and reducing symptoms.

What causes arthritis?

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), a family history of OA
- hands: a family history of OA, repetitive use or previous injuries to the hands, being overweight.

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 sensations are usually worse with activity initially but can be more constant in later disease. These symptoms may affect your ability to do normal daily activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, and opening jars. Other symptoms may include clicking noises, grating sensations, or a loss of flexibility in a joint.

Risk factors & prevention

The causes of OA and the pain associated with it are not well understood, but several biomechanical, genetic, behavioural, and environmental factors are involved. There are many things that can increase your chances of developing OA including:

- your age - people over 45 are more at risk
- being overweight or obese – adipose (fat) tissue is a contributor to body inflammation
- genetics - the genes you inherit can play a role in the development of osteoarthritis
- gender - women are more likely than men to develop osteoarthritis
- repetitive movements associated with an occupation
- significant injury, damage, or overuse of a joint.

OA is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. Much can be done to prevent or better manage the condition to reduce its prevalence and impact. The most important modifiable risk factors for OA are excess weight and obesity, joint injury, and certain repetitive joint-loading occupational activities.

Diagnosis

Your doctor/health-care professional 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 or joint aspiration are only helpful to rule out other types of arthritis.

Treatment

There's no cure for OA, but it can be managed effectively using exercise, weight loss, medications, and in some cases surgery. 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:

- A weight loss program if you are overweight. Weight loss is important for decreasing the loading through joints and reducing the amount of inflammatory chemicals produced by fat cells.
- An exercise program tailored to your condition and ability. The combination of weight loss and exercise has a positive effect on pain, inflammation, and related symptoms.
- Pain management. Using medicines such as pain relievers or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, as well as learning to change the way you think about, and react to pain.
- Joint replacement surgery if your symptoms are no longer controlled with other therapies.
- Arthroscopy (keyhole surgery) is not recommended as a treatment for pain in knee osteoarthritis.

Self care

- See your doctor for treatment and advice. Your doctor will help you get the right treatment to manage your symptoms.
- 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.

- 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 exercise physiologist for advice.
- Have a healthy diet. There is no diet that will cure OA, but a diet aimed at maintaining an ideal body weight is recommended.

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
- cannot 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 triage 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

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health-care professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Want to know more?

Musculoskeletal Australia www.msk.org.au

Arthritis Queensland www.arthritis.org.au

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
www.aihw.gov.au

My Joint Pain www.myjointpain.org.au