



## Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis occurs when cartilage breaks down and is not replaced by new cartilage. Cartilage cushions the joints. When it breaks down, the bones in your joints begin to rub against each other. This causes pain, stiffness, and swelling. Osteoarthritis is often called arthritis.

Arthritis can happen at any age, but it is most common in older people. It never goes away completely, but you can control it. Medicine and home treatment can reduce your pain.

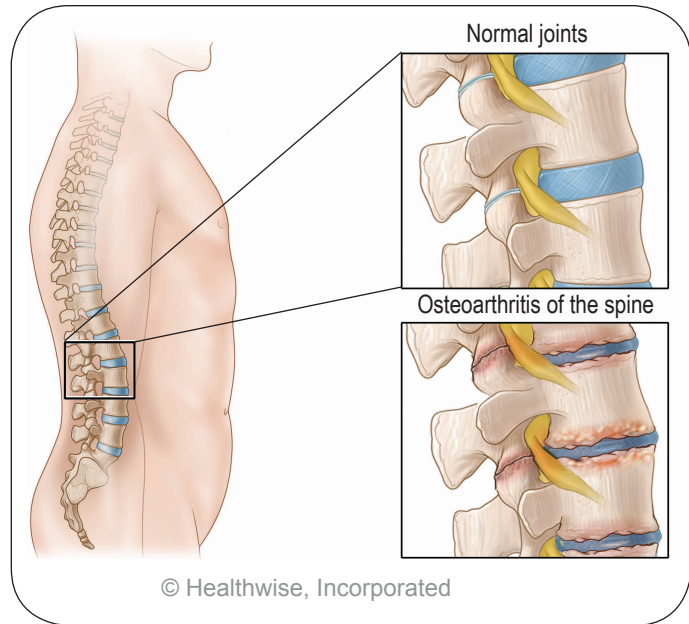
### What causes arthritis?

Your body is always making new cartilage to replace the old cartilage that breaks down. Arthritis occurs when your body cannot make new cartilage as fast as the old cartilage breaks down. Experts do not fully understand why this happens. In some people, injury to a joint, being overweight, or having a family history of arthritis plays a role in the process.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of arthritis usually occur in the hands, hips, knees, or feet, and sometimes in the spine. They may be minor or severe. Most often, arthritis only occurs in one set of joints, such as the knees. But it may affect more than one area of the body, such as both the knees and the hands.

- ◆ At first, you may have pain only when you are active. It is usually worse at the end of the day or after activity. As the disease gets worse, you may also have pain when you are resting.
- ◆ Your joint may be tender and may sometimes swell.



- ◆ You may be stiff after periods of no activity, such as in the morning when you get up. This usually lasts less than an hour.
- ◆ You may not be able to move your joint fully. For example, you may be able to only bend a finger partway.
- ◆ How your joint looks may begin to change. Joints may become larger and swollen at all times, and bony knobs may develop. This usually happens when the disease is getting worse.

### How is arthritis diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you questions about your joint pain and will examine you. Sometimes your exam will include other tests, such as X-rays and blood tests. Your doctor does these to rule out other causes of your symptoms.

## How is it treated?

Arthritis cannot be cured, but it can be managed. Treatment can help you reduce your pain, slow or limit the breakdown of cartilage, and continue to lead an active life.

Your doctor will treat your arthritis based on how severe your symptoms are, how they affect what you can do, and how much joint damage you have. Your treatment will most likely include pain management and things you can do yourself at home.

Be sure you see your doctor on a regular basis. If you feel your symptoms are getting worse or treatment is not helping, call your doctor.

## Medicine for pain relief

Medicine can often help relieve the pain and stiffness of arthritis and allow you to keep doing daily activities. Pain relief medicine does not cure arthritis or slow how fast cartilage breaks down.

You can often manage mild to moderate arthritis pain with over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), or a medicine that decreases swelling, such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). You may also use forms of these medicines that you rub directly on the painful area. Your doctor may also prescribe stronger medicine for more severe pain.

## Surgery

You will only have surgery if you have severe arthritis and pain medicine and home treatment do not work. Or you may have surgery if you have a large loss of cartilage. Surgery can either fix or replace a joint.

## What you can do at home

- ◆ Put heat or cold on your sore joints. As a rule, you use heat if the joint is not swollen and ice if the joint is swollen. You also can take turns with hot and cold packs. Ask your doctor about the best way to use heat and cold.
- ◆ If the joint hurts, wait a few days before you do anything that strains it. Take rest breaks all through the day. Use a cane, crutch, walker, or another device if you need help to get around. Use the cane in the hand opposite the painful joint. So if your right joint is weak, hold the cane in your left hand.
- ◆ Get regular exercise. Exercise helps arthritis, including hip and knee arthritis. Walking, swimming, yoga, biking, and water aerobics are good exercises that are gentle on the joints. Stretch to help prevent stiffness. Talk to your doctor about which exercise is best for you.
- ◆ Stay at a healthy weight. Extra weight can strain the joints, especially the knees and hips, and make the pain worse. Regular exercise and a healthy diet will help you manage your weight.

Your doctor may suggest physical therapy. In physical therapy, a health professional designs a program for you. This program may include stretching, exercise, or heat and cold therapy.

## Questions to ask your doctor

Use the space below to list your questions or concerns. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

### Questions about osteoarthritis: