

## What is arthritis?

The word “arthritis” is derived from two Greek words: *arthron*, meaning a joint, and *-itis*, meaning inflammation. Inflammation typically involves redness, heat, swelling and tenderness. So, technically speaking, arthritis describes a joint that is red, hot, swollen and tender.

Arthritis is a condition in which joints are painful and stiff. If the joints are actually red, hot, swollen, and tender, this is often described as inflammatory arthritis.

A related term, used less often by doctors now, is rheumatism. This non-specific term refers to any persistent condition of pain and stiffness related to joints, tendons, ligaments, or bursas (which are small ‘cushions’ that lie under a tendon to protect it from injury).

Arthritis and rheumatism are common and their frequency increases with age. A Canadian survey in 2000 and 2001 found that less than 5% of those aged 25 to 34 said that a doctor had told them they had arthritis or rheumatism. Among those aged 65 to 74, almost 40% had been given this diagnosis.

Arthritis is not a single disease with a single cause. There are dozens of different types of arthritis, each with its own cause. For instance, bacteria can sometimes cause a severe acute infection called infectious arthritis. Men with hemophilia can have bleeding inside their joints, which over the years can cause a severe arthritis. One particularly severe and sudden type of arthritis, called gout, is caused by crystals of a chemical called uric acid being deposited inside a joint (typically at the base of the big toe).

[Rheumatoid arthritis](#) is a specific form of inflammatory arthritis that is caused by your own immune system, which starts (for no known reason) to attack the membrane lining your joints. Because rheumatoid arthritis is caused by your body attacking itself, it is referred to as an autoimmune disease. The most common type of arthritis, [osteoarthritis](#), is caused by wear and tear on the joints. Because of this, some doctors refer to osteoarthritis as degenerative joint disease. Other forms of inflammatory arthritis include [ankylosing spondylitis](#), which affects the spine, and psoriatic arthritis, which tends to develop mainly in people already suffering from a skin condition called psoriasis.

## How common is arthritis?

Sixteen percent of Canadians over the age of 15 report having been diagnosed with some kind of arthritis. In addition, an estimated one in 1,000 Canadian children below the age of 16 live with juvenile arthritis.

Every year, about 100,000 Canadians are diagnosed with arthritis.

## Who gets arthritis?

The older we get, the more likely we are to have arthritis: by the age of 80, it affects 57% of women and 40% of men. In the population as a whole, nearly twice as many women as men are affected—just under 20% of Canadian women compared to 11% of Canadian men.

## How to prevent arthritis?

Most of the risk factors that make us more likely to develop arthritis are out of our control, such as our genes and our age. However, it appears that smoking and obesity both increase the risk of getting arthritis, so stopping smoking and losing weight might be smart preventative actions!

## What are the signs and symptoms?

The symptoms of arthritis differ somewhat among the different types of arthritis, but they all involve joint pain and stiffness. [Osteoarthritis](#) tends to affect the big weight-bearing joints (hips and knees), as well as the finger joints (usually the knuckle closest to the end of the finger), while [rheumatoid arthritis](#) usually affects the small joints most, such as the middle joints of the fingers, the wrists, the jaw joint, the toes and the ankles. [Ankylosing spondylitis](#) often is first noticed as frequent pain and stiffness in the lower back, while psoriatic arthritis can begin in any joint in the body, usually in people who also have psoriasis.

## How is the disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of arthritis is often made by observing the symptoms alone, although x-rays and blood tests can be very useful.

## How is arthritis treated?

For mild pain or stiffness, simple pain-relieving drugs such as acetaminophen are safe and effective. If your symptoms are more troublesome or inflammation is present, your doctor will probably prescribe an anti-inflammatory drug. Other treatments are specific to the type of arthritis being treated.

## Living with arthritis

Learning as much as possible about your disease—and actively working with your health care professionals—are effective ways to regain control over your life. There is a great deal of information out there that can help. Check out some of the patient associations listed below to get started, or read more specific tips about living with arthritis on our [osteoarthritis](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [ankylosing spondylitis](#) and psoriatic arthritis pages.

## Empowering both the patient and the caregiver

Patients as well as their physicians can access the following sites to find out more information about the major forms of arthritis, their symptoms, treatment options as well as recent related scientific discoveries.

### Resources:

Patient Associations

[The Arthritis Society](#)

[ACTION Atankluiic For People with Chronic Pain](#)

[Canadian Pain Coalition](#)

[Chronic Pain Association of Canada](#)

Congresses

[Canadian Rheumatology Association](#)

[The Canadian Arthritis Network](#)

[Canadian Pain Society](#)

[Canadian Institute for the Relief of Pain and Disability](#)

Other site(s)

[The Arthritis Society](#)

[Canadian Pain Coalition](#)