

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a form of [arthritis](#) that results from wear and tear or cartilage breakdown in a joint. As cartilage wears away, bone may be exposed, causing pain and decreased movement. The bones respond by growing bony projections called “osteophytes” around the sides of the joint, and this contributes to the pain and loss of normal function. Osteoarthritis may also be called degenerative arthritis, degenerative joint disease, osteoarthrosis or hypertrophic osteoarthritis.

How common is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of [arthritis](#), affecting about 10% of all adult Canadians.

Who gets osteoarthritis?

Just about everybody who lives long enough will get osteoarthritis—even at age 40, 90% of people have signs of wear and tear on their joints. Men and women are equally likely to develop osteoarthritis, although men develop it more often than women before the age of 40, and women develop it more often than men between the ages of 40 and 70. After age 70, osteoarthritis affects both sexes equally.

How to prevent osteoarthritis?

Most of the risk factors that make us more likely to develop osteoarthritis are out of our control, such as our genes and our age. However, one risk factor is obesity, which suggests that maintaining a healthy weight can help prevent osteoarthritis.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Osteoarthritis is not a dramatic condition. It starts gradually, and gets worse over many years. The first symptom is usually pain, often described as a deep ache in one or a few joints. In weight-bearing joints, the pain tends to get worse with activities like standing, since this stresses those joints. The joints are typically not red or hot or tender, although swelling may occur over time. They may be stiff after sleeping or inactivity, but this stiffness usually goes away within half an hour. Sometimes joints will make a crackling or grinding noise when they are moved. As osteoarthritis progresses, joints may become less moveable.

Because it is caused by wear and tear, osteoarthritis tends to primarily 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). It often affects the spine and may also affect other finger joints, the neck and the big toes.

How is the disease diagnosed?

Tests are often unnecessary when diagnosing osteoarthritis—in an older person, typical symptoms can usually make the diagnosis. Many doctors will suggest x-rays of the affected joints if you are younger or if your symptoms are more severe. Blood tests are seldom done unless your doctor feels that you might have a different type of arthritis such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#).

How is osteoarthritis treated?

Osteoarthritis is often a mild problem, so you will not need any specific treatment. Gentle exercise is always a good idea, as is heat. If your hands are affected by osteoarthritis, you might want to volunteer to wash the dishes after dinner in pleasantly hot water! For mild pain or stiffness, simple pain-relieving drugs such as acetaminophen are safe and effective. If your symptoms are more troublesome, your doctor will probably prescribe an anti-inflammatory drug. Alternatively a non steroidal anti-inflammatory medication can be taken to lessen pain and swelling. Drugs don't cure osteoarthritis, but they can reduce symptoms and thus allow you to move more easily.

If you have severe osteoarthritis of the knees or hips that is limiting your activities, you may be a candidate for surgery. Replacing your arthritic hip or knee with a new synthetic one made of titanium, other metals and plastics almost always improves motion and function and dramatically decreases pain.

Living with osteoarthritis

Some tips:

- Exercise affected joints gently (if possible, by exercising in a pool; otherwise by using a stationary bicycle or walking)
- Balance exercising a painful joint with resting it, but don't immobilize it for long periods of time
- Do stretching exercises every day
- When possible, continue to do your normal daily activities
- Apply a heating pad or a damp, warm towel to affected joints
- Wear shoes that provide good support to your feet
- Shoe inserts may help reduce pain while walking
- Special equipment (such as a cane, a walker, an elastic knee support or a fixed seat in the bathtub) can protect joints during painful activities.
- Choose chairs with straight backs and relatively high seats
- Use a firm mattress or a bed board
- Physical therapy can be helpful