

Wellness Articles

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What is osteoarthritis?

September is National Arthritis Awareness Month.

Osteoarthritis is a painful problem with the joints. Healthy joints help your body move, bend, and twist. Knees glide up and down stairs without creaking or crunching. Hips move you along on a walk without a complaint. But when you have arthritis, such simple, everyday movements can hurt. Using the stairs can be painful. Walking a few steps, opening a door, and even combing your hair can be hard.

Arthritis is mainly a disease of the spine, hip, hand, knee and foot. But it can happen in other joints too. A joint is where two bones connect. And you have them all over your body. Arthritis is most common in older people. Even though you can't cure arthritis, there are many treatments that can help with your pain and make it easier for you to move. And you can do things to keep the damage from getting worse.

What causes osteoarthritis?

The simplest way to describe arthritis is that it's wear and tear on the cartilage of your joints. This cushioning tissue is firm, thick, and slippery. It covers and protects the ends of bones where they meet to form a joint.

With arthritis, there are changes in the cartilage that cause it to break down. When it breaks down, the bones rub together and cause damage and pain. Experts don't know why this breakdown in cartilage happens. But aging, joint injury, being overweight, and genetics may be a part of the reason.

What are the symptoms?

- **Pain.** Your joints may ache, or the pain may feel burning or sharp.
- **Stiffness.** Getting up in the morning can be hard. Your joints may feel stiff and creaky for a short time, until you get moving.
- **Muscle weakness.** The muscles around the joint may get weaker. This happens a lot with arthritis in the knee.
- **Deformed joints.** Joints can start to look like they are the wrong shape, especially as arthritis gets worse.
- **Reduced range of motion and loss of use of the joint.** As your arthritis gets worse, you may not be able to fully bend, flex, or extend your joints. Or you may not be able to use them at all.
- **Cracking and creaking.** Your joints may make crunching, creaking sounds.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Your doctor will check that your pain is not caused by another problem. He or she will ask questions about your symptoms, such as:

- Is the pain burning, aching, or sharp?
- Are your joints stiff in the morning? If yes, how long does the stiffness last?
- Do you have any joint swelling?

If your joints are tender and swollen and the muscles are weak, this will also help your doctor confirm whether you have arthritis. You may also have X-rays to check your joints for damage. Your doctor may want to do blood tests or other tests to see if there are other causes for your pain.

How is it treated?

There are many treatments for arthritis, but what works for someone else may not help you. Work with your doctor to find what is best for you. Often a mix of things helps the most.

Your treatment may include:

Pain medicine. If your pain is mild, over-the-counter pain medicines such as acetaminophen (for example, Tylenol) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may help. Commonly used NSAIDs include ibuprofen (such as Advil and Motrin) and naproxen (such as Aleve). But if these don't get rid of your pain, you may need a stronger prescription medicine. Having shots of medicine in the joint also helps some people.

Heat or ice on the painful joint. Heat may help you loosen up before an activity. Ice is a good pain reliever after activity or exercise. Your doctor may give you gels or creams that you can rub on the joint to make it stop hurting.

Losing weight, if you're overweight. Losing weight may be one of the best things you can do for your arthritis. It helps take some of the stress off of your joints.

Exercising to strengthen your muscles. Having stronger thigh muscles, for example, can help reduce stress on your knees. Swimming, biking, and walking are good activities. But make

sure you talk to your doctor about what kind of activity is best for you. You may also get help from a physiotherapist.

Surgery. If the pain in your hip or knee does not get better with treatment, you may decide to have surgery to replace the joint.

There are also things you can do at home to help relieve your symptoms. For example, there are devices and tools that can take the stress and weight off of your joints and make it easier for you to hold objects, open and close things, and walk. Doorknob covers, tape, braces, splints, and canes may help.

You might also try changing activities or the way you do things to reduce the stress on the joint that hurts and allow you to move better. For example, walk instead of jog. Or use a sewing machine to make a quilt instead of making it by hand.

Do you still have questions? Ask your family doctor or call Health Link at 811.