

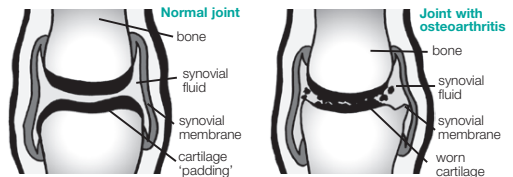
# Osteoarthritis

**Osteoarthritis (OA) is a form of arthritis that destroys the cartilage in joints. Fingers and weight-bearing joints (knees, hips and spine) are the joints most often affected. It is the most common type of arthritis. Many people develop osteoarthritis in one or more joints as they get older.**

## Normal joints

A joint is where two moving bones come together. Joints protect bone ends from wearing away and act as shock absorbers. A joint is made up of:

- **cartilage:** a strong, smooth protective coating on the end of each bone
- **joint capsule:** a tough covering that holds all the parts of the joint together
- **synovial membrane:** a thin layer of tissue that lines the inside of the joint capsule
- **synovial fluid:** a fluid, made by the synovial membrane, that lubricates the joint
- **muscles, ligaments, and tendons:** that keep the bones stable and allow the joint to bend and move.



## Osteoarthritis

In a joint affected by OA, the cartilage that protects the ends of the bones breaks down and wears away. Bits of bone or cartilage can break off and float inside the joint space, and lumps of bone (spurs) may grow on the ends of the bones. As the damage gets worse, the joint loses its smooth movement, the space between the bones narrows and the bones may eventually rub against each other. The joint may change size and shape.

## Signs and symptoms

OA usually develops slowly over months or years. The first sign of OA is often joint pain during or after physical activity.

Symptoms of OA include:

- joint pain, made worse by movement and cold weather, and usually relieved by rest
- joint stiffness
- limited range of movement of the joint
- crackling or grating feelings or sounds in the joint
- bony lumps around the joint
- joint swelling.

The symptoms and severity of OA vary from person to person. Some people have mild OA that does not get worse over time. Some people have severe OA. Severe OA can make it difficult to work or carry out usual daily tasks.

Pain and disability can lead to exhaustion, anxiety and depression.

## Managing Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis cannot be cured, but can be well managed. Management plans include ways to reduce pain, save joint function and manage the tasks of daily living. Joint care, lifestyle changes and mechanical aids are vital. Medicines can also help. Joint surgery (e.g. a joint replacement) may be needed.

## Self care

Learn how to protect and care for your joints, and to manage the symptoms of osteoarthritis.

### Pain relief

- Heat therapy (e.g. hot packs, a warm bath) can relieve joint pain and stiffness.
- Cold therapy (e.g. cold packs) can relieve joint pain and swelling.
- Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) can relieve joint pain and stiffness.

Ask a doctor or physiotherapist about how and when to use heat, cold and TENS therapy.

### Rest and joint care

- Learn to recognise when your body needs to rest.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques. Regular relaxation can improve symptoms.
- Keep a good posture to limit stress on joints and muscles.
- Wear suitable footwear. Shoe inserts and cushioned shoes can help reduce joint stress. Ask a physiotherapist or podiatrist for advice.
- Walking sticks, braces and splints can protect and support joints.
- Mechanical devices and other aids can help with daily living and household tasks (e.g. hand rails, tap turners, reaching aids).

Ask an occupational therapist or the 'Independent Living Centres Australia' organisation about splints, aids and devices.

### Exercise

- Regular exercise can improve mood, reduce joint pain and stiffness, increase flexibility, and strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments.
- Warm water (e.g. a heated pool) can make movement easier.

Ask a doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or 'Arthritis Australia' about suitable exercises.

### Weight control

Keep to a healthy weight to limit stress on weight-bearing joints. Exercise regularly and have a healthy diet, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

### Joint awareness

Strain or injury to a joint (e.g. due to sport or work) can increase the risk of osteoarthritis developing in that joint. Proper treatment of injuries and joint protection during physical activity can help to limit or avoid OA later in life.

## Medicines

A number of different medicines can help relieve the symptoms of osteoarthritis. A doctor or pharmacist can advise on the best medicine for you.

**Pain relievers:** Paracetamol can relieve OA pain without causing serious side effects. Paracetamol tablets often work best when taken *regularly three or four times a day*. Sometimes stronger opioid pain relievers (e.g. codeine, tramadol, oxycodone), which must be prescribed by a doctor, are also needed.

**Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs):** (e.g. diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen, celecoxib, meloxicam) Can relieve joint pain, swelling and stiffness. Oral NSAIDs (tablets, capsules, mixtures) and topical NSAIDs (creams and gels) are available. Some can be purchased without a doctor's prescription. Oral NSAID can cause serious side effects, so are best used only if regular paracetamol does not give enough pain relief.

**Corticosteroids:** Are anti-inflammatory medicines that can be injected into a joint to give short-term relief of pain and inflammation.

**Hylans:** Can be injected into a joint to increase the lubricant and shock-absorbing properties of the synovial fluid.

**Complementary medicines** (e.g. glucosamine, chondroitin): May help relieve symptoms of OA.

**Liniments, capsaicin cream and heat rubs:** May help reduce pain and stiffness.

## For more information

### Arthritis Australia

Phone: 1800 011 041

Website: [www.arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au)

### Independent Living Centres Australia

Phone: 1300 885 886

Website: [www.ilcaustralia.org](http://www.ilcaustralia.org)

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on  
CMI leaflets.

### NPS Medicine Wise

#### Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26  
from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.*

## Related fact cards

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- » *Relaxation Techniques*
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