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## Arthritis

The word "arthritis" makes many people think of painful, stiff joints. But, there are many kinds of arthritis, each with different symptoms and treatments. Most types of arthritis are chronic. That means they can go on for a long period of time.

Arthritis can attack joints in almost any part of the body. Some types of arthritis cause changes you can see and feel—swelling, warmth, and redness in your joints. In some kinds of arthritis, the pain and swelling last only a short time, but are very uncomfortable. Other types of arthritis might be less painful, but still slowly cause damage to your joints.

### **Common Kinds of Arthritis**

Arthritis is one of the most common diseases in the United States. Older people most often have osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, or gout but younger people are also diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

**Osteoarthritis (OA)** is the most common type of arthritis in older people. OA starts when tissue, called cartilage, that pads bones in a joint begins to wear away. When the cartilage has worn away, your bones rub against each other. OA most often happens in your hands, neck, lower back, or the large weight-bearing joints of your body, such as knees and hips.

OA symptoms range from stiffness and mild pain that comes and goes to pain that doesn't stop, even when you are resting or sleeping. Sometimes OA causes your joints to feel stiff after you haven't moved them for a while, like after riding in the car. The stiffness goes away when you move the joint. Over time, OA can make it hard to move your joints. It can cause a disability if your back, knees, or hips are affected.

Why do you get OA? Growing older is what most often puts you at risk for OA, possibly because your joints and the cartilage around them become less able to recover from stress and damage. Also, OA in the hands may run in families. Or, OA

in the knees can be linked with being overweight. Injuries or overuse may cause OA in joints such as knees, hips, or hands.

**Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)** is an *autoimmune* disease, a type of illness that makes your body attack itself. RA causes pain, swelling, and stiffness that lasts for hours. RA can happen in many different joints at the same time. People with RA often feel tired or run a fever. RA is more common in women than men.

RA can damage almost any joint. It often happens in the same joint on both sides of your body. RA can also cause problems with your heart, muscles, blood vessels, nervous system, and eyes.

**Gout** is one of the most painful kinds of arthritis. It most often happens in the big toe, but other joints can also be affected. Swelling may cause the skin to pull tightly around the joint and make the area red or purple and very tender.

Eating foods rich in purines like liver, dried beans, peas, anchovies, or gravy can lead to a gout attack in people with the disease. Using alcohol, being overweight, and taking certain medications may make gout worse. In older people, some blood pressure medicines can also increase the chance of a gout attack. To decide if you have gout, your doctor might do blood tests and x-rays.

## **Warning Signs**

You might have some type of arthritis if you have:

- Ongoing joint pain
- Joint swelling
- Joint stiffness
- Tenderness or pain when touching a joint
- Problems using or moving a joint normally
- Warmth and redness in a joint

If any one of these symptoms lasts more than 2 weeks, see your regular doctor or one who specializes in treating arthritis, called a rheumatologist. If you have a fever, feel physically ill, suddenly have a swollen joint, or have problems using your joint, see your doctor right away.

## **Treating Arthritis**

Getting enough rest, doing the right exercise, eating a healthy, well-balanced diet, and learning the right way to use and protect your joints are keys to living with any kind of arthritis. The right shoes and a cane can help with pain in the feet, knees, and hips when walking. But make sure the cane is fitted by a professional. Don't borrow one from a friend or neighbor. There are also gadgets to help you open jars and bottles or to turn the doorknobs in your house.

Some medicines can help with pain and swelling. Acetaminophen might ease arthritis pain. Some people find NSAIDs (**nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs**), like ibuprofen, naproxen, and ketoprofen, helpful. Some NSAIDs are sold without a prescription, while others must be prescribed by a doctor. Be very careful about possible side effects of some NSAIDs, whether sold with or without a prescription. Read the warnings on the package or insert that comes with the drug. Talk to your doctor about if and how you should use acetaminophen or NSAIDs for your arthritis pain. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has more information about drugs such as those mentioned here.

**Osteoarthritis (OA).** Medicines can help you control the pain. Rest and exercise may make it easier to move your joints. Keeping your weight down is a good idea. If pain from OA is very bad, there are shots your doctor can give you.

**Rheumatoid arthritis (RA).** Treatment can help the pain and swelling. This might slow down or stop joint damage. You may feel better and find it easier to move around. Your doctor might also suggest anti-rheumatic drugs called DMARDs (**disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs**). These can slow damage from the disease. Other medicines known as corticosteroids (like prednisone) can ease swelling. These are strong medicine and should only be taken with a doctor's prescription. Another kind of drug, called a biologic response modifier, blocks the damage done by the immune system. These may help people with mild-to-moderate RA when other treatments have not worked.

**Gout.** The most common treatment for an acute attack of gout is NSAIDs or corticosteroids. They can bring down the swelling, so you may start to feel better within a few hours after treatment. The pain usually goes away within a few days. If you have had an attack of gout, talk to your doctor to learn why you had the attack and how to prevent future attacks. If you have had several attacks, your doctor might prescribe medicines to prevent future ones.

## Exercise Can Help

Along with taking the right medicine and properly resting your joints, exercise might help with arthritis symptoms. Daily exercise, such as walking or swimming, helps keep joints moving, lessens pain, and makes muscles around the joints stronger.

Three types of [exercise](#) are best if you have arthritis:

- *Range-of-motion* exercises, like dancing, might relieve stiffness, keep you flexible, and help you keep moving your joints.
- *Strengthening* exercises, such as weight training, will keep or add to muscle strength. Strong muscles support and protect your joints.
- *Aerobic or endurance* exercises, like bicycle riding, make your heart and arteries healthier, help prevent weight gain, and also may lessen swelling in some joints.

## Other Things To Do

Along with exercise and weight control, there are other ways to ease the pain around joints. You might find comfort by using a heating pad or a cold pack, soaking in a warm bath, or swimming in a heated pool.

Your doctor may suggest surgery when damage to your joints becomes disabling or when other treatments do not help with pain. Surgeons can repair or replace some joints with artificial (man-made) ones.

## Other Remedies

Recent studies suggest that acupuncture may ease OA pain for some people. Research also shows that two dietary supplements, glucosamine and chondroitin, may help lessen moderate to severe OA pain, but they seem to have no effect on changes to cartilage in the knee. Scientists continue to study these kinds of alternative treatments. Always check with your doctor before trying any new treatment for arthritis.

Many people with arthritis try remedies that have not been tested or proven helpful. Some of these, such as snake venom, are harmful. Others, such as copper bracelets, are harmless, but also unproven.

How can you tell that a remedy may be unproven?

- The remedy claims that a treatment, like a lotion or cream, works for all types of arthritis and other diseases.
- Scientific support comes from only one research study.
- The label has no directions for use or warning about side effects.
- The person recommending the treatment profits directly from your purchase of the medicine.
- People who are now completely well are presented to you as having the same problems you have (this is called anecdotal evidence).

See below for more information about getting NIA's *AgePage* called *Beware Of Health Scams*.

### **Talk To Your Doctor**

Pain and arthritis do not have to be part of growing older. You can work with your doctor to safely lessen the pain and stiffness and to prevent more serious damage to your joints.

### **For More Information**

Here are some helpful resources:

#### **American College of Rheumatology/Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals**

2200 Lake Boulevard, NE

Atlanta, GA 30319

1-404-633-3777

[www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org)

#### **Arthritis Foundation**

P.O. Box 7669

Atlanta, GA 30357-0669

1-800-283-7800 (toll-free)

or check the telephone directory for your local chapter

[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

## **Food and Drug Administration**

10903 New Hampshire Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20993  
1-888-463-6332

[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

## **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine**

NCCAM Clearinghouse  
P.O. Box 7923  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898  
1-888-644-6226 (toll-free)  
1-866-464-3615 (TTY/toll-free)

[www.nccam.nih.gov](http://www.nccam.nih.gov)

## **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases**

NIAMS Information Clearinghouse  
1 AMS Circle  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3675  
1-877-226-4267 (toll-free)  
1-301-565-2966 (TTY)

[www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

To get the NIA's exercise guide or *Beware of Health Scams* or for more information on health and aging, contact:

## **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057  
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

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