

LIVING WITH ARTHRITIS

Health Information Basics for You and Your Family

Focused on osteoarthritis, the most common type of arthritis



National Institute of
Arthritis and Musculoskeletal
and Skin Diseases

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You can find this publication on the NIAMS website at

<https://www.niams.nih.gov>

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What Is Arthritis?

When people talk about having arthritis, they are usually talking about problems with their joints. The problems can affect any joint in the body, including:

- Hands.
- Neck.
- Knees.
- Lower back.
- Hips.

There are many different types of arthritis with different causes and treatments. This booklet is going to give you information and tips on living with osteoarthritis (OA). It is the most common type of arthritis and is more common in older people.

OA can be painful, but there are things you can do to feel better. By learning about the disease and taking part in your care, you can learn to manage the symptoms to help you live an active lifestyle.

For more information about OA and other types of arthritis, please visit the NIAMS Health Topics webpage at <https://www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics>.

OA is a joint disease that usually happens when the tissues in the joint break down over time.



What Are the Symptoms of Osteoarthritis?

When you have OA, you may feel:

- Pain when using the joint.
- Joint stiffness, usually lasting less than 30 minutes.
- Swelling in and around the joint.
- Changes in how you can move the joint.
- Like the joint is loose or unstable.

Pain and other joint symptoms may lead you to feel tired, have problems sleeping, and feel depressed.

Remember, there are things you can do to help improve your joint pain and stiffness. It is important to visit your doctor, who can suggest and prescribe treatments that may lessen your pain and help you feel better. Be sure to keep track of your symptoms so your doctor has a full picture of what you are feeling. Also, bring a list of medications and supplements you take to your doctor appointment.

See pages 15 and 17 for symptom and medication trackers that you can tear out and take with you to the doctor.

How Do Doctors Recognize Osteoarthritis?

There is no one test that shows if you have OA. Your doctor may:

- Ask about your medical and family history.
- Do a physical exam to check your general health, reflexes, and problem joints.
- Get images of your joints by sending you for x-rays or MRIs.
- Order blood tests and other screenings to make sure there are no other causes of your symptoms, such as an infection.



How Do Doctors Treat Osteoarthritis?

The goals of your treatment may include:

- Improve how the joint works.
- Stop your joint problems from getting worse.
- Help you improve or keep your quality of life.

You may see several types of doctors for your OA, including your family doctor, a rheumatologist, or other specialists who can work with you to treat your joint problems.

Treating OA usually includes:

- Exercising, which can lower joint pain and stiffness and increase flexibility and muscle strength. Remember to start any exercise program slowly after talking to your doctor.
- Managing your weight to help lower the stress on joints. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can help to lower pain, prevent more injury, and improve movement in your joints. This can be especially helpful for your knees or hips.
- Using braces or other orthotics that your doctor prescribes and that are fitted by a health care professional.

Some people may need medications to help manage the symptoms of OA (**see page 17 for a tear-out medication tracker**). Your doctor may recommend surgery if your joint problems are severe and all other treatments tried have not

helped. However, surgery is not right for everyone, and your doctor will help you decide if it's best for you.

You may hear or read about other types of therapies to help treat your OA. For example:

- Massage can increase blood flow and bring warmth to the area.
- Acupuncture may help relieve pain. Doctors believe that the needles help release natural, pain-relieving chemicals made by the nervous system.

Before taking any medicines or using other therapies, talk to your doctor.



How to Help Manage Osteoarthritis

There are many things you can do to help manage and live with OA. Start by working with your doctor to set up a treatment plan that works for you.

Learning as much as you can about OA from reliable sources can help, too. Some people find it helpful to take a class or talk with a community health worker to learn about the disease and how to manage the symptoms to allow you to live an active lifestyle.



You may feel sadness or frustration when living with osteoarthritis. But keep in mind, many people with this disease live full lives. You may find it helpful to look for a support group, online or in your community. Support groups can help you connect with others living with OA, and offer tips on how to manage your joint problems.

For a list of possible organizations to contact, see the “Other Resources” section on page 12.

Here are some other tips that may help:

- Try using heat and cold therapies because they can lower joint pain. Heat therapy can improve blood flow. Cold therapy can numb nerves around the painful joint and help with swelling.
- Use a cane or walker when you need it. They can help you move around safely, provide stability, and lower pain.
- If you have arthritis in your hands, you may find it helpful to use devices such as jar openers to help you grip.
- Try to avoid repeated motions, such as frequent bending.
- Shoe inserts or braces can help support your joint and help lower pain and pressure on the area. This can be helpful when you stand or walk.

Use the tear-out tools starting on page 15 to keep track of your symptoms, medications, and questions you would like to ask your doctor.



- Exercise is important to help you keep, or improve, your daily living skills. Remember to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercises and start slowly. It may take some time for you to adjust to the new activity. Some exercise choices may include:
 - ◆ Walking.
 - ◆ Low-impact aerobics in person or video classes.
 - ◆ Balance exercises, such as tai chi or yoga.
 - ◆ Use of weights or exercise bands to strengthen muscles.
 - ◆ Swimming or water aerobics.

Research Supported by NIH/NIAMS

Scientists supported by the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are working to find out what causes OA and other forms of arthritis and how they can best be treated. Researchers are looking at these issues:

- Risk factors for different types of arthritis.
- Treatment options, and how to prevent these diseases, and different ways of testing for them.
- Types of testing methods that help doctors look at joints more closely.

In addition, studies continue to:

- Look at how our genes that relate to bones and joints may be affected by the world around us.
- Find new ways to measure what is happening inside the body, which could help researchers understand how different types of arthritis start and progress.
- Study if weight loss and exercise help manage the symptoms and outcomes in people with arthritis of the knee.
- Compare how different factors may influence pain relief in people with arthritis.

Clinical Trials: You Could Make a Difference!

A clinical trial is a type of research study that involves people who volunteer to take part in it. Most clinical trials test a new treatment for a health problem, like a new drug or diet. Clinical trials help doctors learn if a new treatment is better, the same, or worse than standard care. Other clinical trials test ways to prevent a disease or find it early.

Talk to your doctor about whether a clinical trial would be right for you. When you volunteer to take part in clinical research, you help doctors and researchers learn more about arthritis.

Also, when you participate in a study, you may have the chance to receive the newest treatment and have additional care from the clinical trial staff.

To learn more about the basics of participating in a clinical trial, visit the website NIH Clinical Research Trials and You at <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/nih-clinical-research-trials-you>.

At that website you will find:

- Information on risks and potential benefits.
- Firsthand stories from clinical trial volunteers.
- Explanations from researchers.
- Instructions for finding a clinical trial at the NIH or somewhere else in the country.

To hear from people who have taken part in clinical studies led by NIAMS researchers, watch the videos at <https://www.niams.nih.gov/community-outreach-initiative/clinical-research>.

Where Can I Find More Information About Osteoarthritis?

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) Information Clearinghouse

National Institutes of Health

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

Phone: 301-495-4484

Toll free: 877-22-NIAMS (226-4267)

TTY: 301-565-2966

Fax: 301-718-6366

Email: NIAMInfo@mail.nih.gov

Website: <https://www.niams.nih.gov>

For more information about osteoarthritis, visit <https://www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/osteoarthritis>.

If you need more information about available resources in your language or another language, please visit our website or contact the NIAMS Information Clearinghouse.

Other Resources

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Toll free: 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332)

Website: <https://www.fda.gov>

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

Website: <https://nccih.nih.gov>

National Institute on Aging

Website: <https://www.nia.nih.gov>

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

Website: <https://www.aaos.org>

American College of Rheumatology

Website: <https://www.rheumatology.org>

American Physical Therapy Association

Website: <https://www.apta.org>

Arthritis Foundation

Website: <https://www.arthritis.org>

The mission of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Institutes of Health (NIH), is to support research into the causes, treatment, and prevention of arthritis and musculoskeletal and skin diseases; the training of basic and clinical scientists to carry out this research; and the dissemination of information on research progress in these diseases. The NIAMS Information Clearinghouse is a public service sponsored by the NIAMS that provides health information and information sources. Additional information can be found on the NIAMS website at <https://www.niams.nih.gov>.

Osteoarthritis Symptom Tracker

This symptom tracker can help you and your doctor understand more about your condition and health. Write down how you feel and any changes in your health. Share this information with your doctor at each appointment.

Pain is a common symptom of osteoarthritis. When describing your pain, use this scale to rate how bad it is.

Pain Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No Pain	Very Little Pain	Some Pain	Moderate Pain	Severe Pain	Unbearable Pain				

Common osteoarthritis symptoms:

- Joint pain and stiffness.
- Swelling in and around the joint—especially after using it a lot.
- Changes in the ability to use the joint.
- Feeling that the joint is loose.

Symptom (describe what it is and where)	When did the symptom start?	Did the symptom go away? If so when?	Did anything help ease or relieve the pain?	How bad is the symptom or pain?
Pain when using the joint	10/30	No, stays all the time	No	5 from pain scale

Notes or Concerns:



What Questions Should I Ask My Doctor About Osteoarthritis?

Use this worksheet as a guide to start a conversation about osteoarthritis with your doctor. By talking with your doctor, you can work together to help manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life. Ask some of the questions below, and use the blank spaces to fill in your own questions.

Common Questions	Answers/Notes
Are there any new treatments that may help my symptoms?	
Should I see other types of health care providers to help manage my osteoarthritis?	
How often do I need to come to the doctor's office for regular checkups?	
Can you refer me to services in the community that support people with osteoarthritis?	
Do you know of any research studies about osteoarthritis that I might be able to participate in or learn more about?	
Is there anything else I can do to make my symptoms better?	





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