

# What Is Arthritis?

Arthritis is more than just wear and tear or an old person's disease. Find out about the different types of arthritis.

Arthritis is very common but is not well understood. Actually, "arthritis" is not a single disease; it is an informal way of referring to joint pain or joint disease. There are more than 100 types of arthritis and related conditions. People of all ages, sexes and races can and do have arthritis, and it is the leading cause of disability in America. More than 50 million adults and 300,000 children have some type of arthritis. It is most common among women and occurs more frequently as people get older.

Common arthritis joint symptoms include swelling, pain, stiffness and decreased range of motion. Symptoms may come and go. They can be mild, moderate or severe. They may stay about the same for years but can progress or get worse over time. Severe arthritis can result in chronic pain, inability to do daily activities and make it difficult to walk or climb stairs.

Arthritis can cause permanent joint changes. These changes may be visible, such as knobby finger joints, but often the damage can only be seen on X-ray. Some types of arthritis also affect the heart, eyes, lungs, kidneys and skin as well as the joints.

## Fast Facts

- In the United States, 23% of all adults—over 54 million people—have arthritis.
- About 24 million adults are limited in their activities from arthritis, and more than 1 in 4 adults with arthritis report severe joint pain.
- Arthritis commonly occurs with other chronic diseases, like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, and can make it harder for people to manage these conditions.
- CDC works to prevent pain and disability in people with arthritis, especially those affected by health disparities, which are differences in health across different geographic, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

# Types of Arthritis

## Degenerative Arthritis

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. When the cartilage – the slick, cushioning surface on the ends of bones – wears away, bone rubs against bone, causing pain, swelling and stiffness. Over time, joints can lose strength and pain may become chronic. Risk factors include excess weight, family history, age and previous injury (i.e., an anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL tear).

Regular physical activity, hot and cold therapies, over-the-counter pain relievers and assistive devices are commonly used to help manage mild to moderate osteoarthritis symptoms. If joint symptoms are severe, causing limited mobility and affecting quality of life, joint replacement may be necessary. Osteoarthritis may be prevented by staying active, maintaining a healthy weight and avoiding injury and repetitive movements.

## Inflammatory Arthritis

A healthy immune system is protective. It generates internal inflammation to get rid of infection and prevent disease. But with inflammatory types of arthritis, the immune system doesn't work properly and mistakenly attacks the joints with uncontrolled inflammation, potentially causing joint erosion. Inflammation can also damage to internal organs, eyes and other parts of the body. Rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and gout are examples of inflammatory arthritis.

Researchers believe that a combination of genetics and environmental factors can trigger autoimmunity. Smoking is an example of an environmental risk factor that can trigger rheumatoid arthritis in people with certain genes.

With autoimmune and inflammatory types of arthritis, early diagnosis and aggressive treatment is critical. Slowing disease activity can help minimize or even prevent permanent joint damage. Remission (little to no disease activity) is the goal and may be achieved by using one or more medications known as disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs). Other treatment goals include reducing pain, improving function and preventing further joint damage.

## Infectious Arthritis

A bacterium, virus or fungus can enter the joint and trigger inflammation. Examples of organisms that can infect joints are salmonella and shigella (food poisoning or contamination), chlamydia and gonorrhea (sexually transmitted diseases) and hepatitis C (a blood-to-blood infection, often through shared needles or transfusions). In many cases, timely treatment with antibiotics may clear the joint infection, but sometimes the arthritis becomes chronic.

## Metabolic Arthritis

Uric acid is formed as the body breaks down purines, a substance found in human cells and in many foods. Some people have high levels of uric acid because they naturally produce more than is needed or the body can't get rid of it quickly enough. In some people, uric acid builds up and forms needle-like crystals in the joint, resulting in sudden spikes of extreme joint pain, or a gout attack. Gout can come and go in episodes or, if uric acid levels aren't reduced, can become chronic, causing ongoing pain and disability.

## What You Can Do

The most important first step is to get an accurate diagnosis of what's causing your joint pain. Talk to your primary care doctor about your symptoms. You may be referred to a rheumatologist or orthopedist, doctors who specialize in arthritis and related conditions. There are many things that can be done to preserve joint function, mobility and quality of life. Learning about the disease and treatment options, making time for physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight are essential. Arthritis is a commonly misunderstood disease. The Arthritis Foundation is the only nonprofit organization dedicated to serving all people with arthritis. It has many resources for learning about arthritis, connecting with other people who have arthritis and helping to raise funds for a cure.

## Tips to Ease Joint Pain

Joint pain getting you down? Learn how to ease joint pain and arthritis symptoms with this head-to-toe guide.

Joint pain can make even the simplest activities difficult. And pain in even one joint can take a toll on your entire body. For example, a painful neck can prevent you from turning your head properly, placing stress on your shoulders. A painful knee may cause you to walk in a way that affects your hips, back and feet. And holding a joint still to protect it can make moving it more difficult – and in some cases almost impossible – over time.

If joint pain is caused by an inflammatory disease such as rheumatoid arthritis or juvenile idiopathic arthritis, systemic treatment is needed to stop inflammation that can lead to joint damage or destruction. For flares of pain, persistent pain or pain due to other causes, there are many things you can do on your own – or ask your doctor or physical therapist about – to get relief.

**Solutions** vary and may include splints, therapeutic exercises or more informal daily modifications. Here's a few suggestions to help ease joint pain head-to-toe:

## Fingers

Painful fingers can make it difficult to pick up small objects or hold a pen or pencil.

**Solutions:** When writing, use pens or pencils with soft grip covers. Children with finger pain can use large pencils or crayons. When possible, use a computer instead of writing by hand and use voice-recognition software if you find it difficult to use a keyboard. Use play-dough, putty or a stress ball to strengthen your fingers.

## Hip

Hip pain can make it difficult to walk, climb steps, sit for long periods or even sleep.

**Solutions:** Practice range-of-motion and stretching exercises to maintain flexibility, ease pain and reduce the risk of further injury. Here are two exercises to try:

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Gently tightening your stomach and buttock muscles, lift your hips three-five inches off the floor. Avoid arching your back. Hold for five to 10 seconds, and then slowly lower your hips to the floor. Repeat 10 times, two to four times daily.

Lie on your back with both legs straight. Slowly pull one knee toward your chest with both hands until you feel a gentle stretch in your buttock. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds. Keep your stomach muscles tightened and slowly lower your leg back down. Repeat with other leg. Practice two to four times daily.

Soaking in a warm bath can also help dial down pain and stiffness and make exercising easier.

Hip pain in children may signal uncontrolled inflammation, which left untreated, may cause joint damage and growth problems. So, it's especially important for children to seek out professional help from a physical therapist or rheumatologist. This is also true for adults with inflammatory forms of arthritis like RA.

## Knee

If pain and stiffness make it difficult to straighten the knee, you may walk with a limp and find it hard to squat or climb stairs.

**Solutions:** When experiencing knee pain, you should rest with your knee straight and your heel propped up. Use a cane in the hand opposite the affected knee when walking, particularly on uneven surfaces, or climbing stairs. A physical therapist can work you to strengthen the quadricep muscles for knee support.

One exercise to try: Lie on your back with one leg bent and the other straight. Tighten the muscles of the straightened leg and lift your leg to the level of your other knee. Slowly lower. Perform 10 repetitions, and then switch legs. Repeat two more times and practice at least once daily.

## Neck

Pain in your neck can make it difficult to look up or turn your head sideways. If you avoid twisting your neck by moving your shoulders or entire body, the surrounding muscles may hurt as much as the joints themselves.

**Solutions:** Place moist heat on muscles to help them relax. Sleep with a cervical pillow – or no pillow at all – to help alleviate neck pain. Practice slow range-of-motion exercises – like moving your head up and down and side to side – to help prevent loss of motion and decrease

## Elbow

Even when it causes pain, it's important to straighten your elbow, or you could eventually lose the ability to do so. Over time, holding any joint in a bent position may cause the muscles on that side to shorten.

**Solutions:** Use a heating pad or take a warm bath or shower to loosen the joint and relax stiff muscles. Apply ice packs for swelling. To prevent the muscles from shortening, try exercises that require straightening your elbow, such as pushing away light objects or “pushing” pretend objects up to the ceiling. Speak with a physical therapist about different types of braces and splints that take pressure off painful elbows and permit healing.

For more information and resources on Arthritis, visit these websites :

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

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