

Arthritis

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

The term *arthritis* refers to a variety of problems with the joints. Arthritis generally causes pain, swelling, and stiffness and can affect one or more joints of the body. It can occur at any age, but affects older people most frequently.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF ARTHRITIS?

- Osteoarthritis
- Rheumatoid arthritis

WHAT IS OSTEOARTHRITIS?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common arthritis. It is also known as the “wear and tear” arthritis and is caused by a breakdown of the joint cartilage. It is a progressive degenerative joint disease, meaning it gets worse over time. It may occur at any age, but is especially common for people in their 50s and 60s. Osteoarthritis generally affects the weight-bearing joints, like the knees, hips and the joints of the spine. However, Osteoarthritis can also affect the fingers.



Osteoarthritis

Signs/Symptoms

- Joint pain/tenderness that gets worse over time
- Joint stiffness, especially in the morning
- Loss of movement
- *Nodes* or bony knobs around some joints

WHAT IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a condition that causes inflammation, and eventual destruction, of the lining of the joint or *synovial membrane*. It usually starts in middle age, but affects all age groups and is more common in women. Rheumatoid arthritis affects both sides of the body equally.



Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect all body joints but usually occurs first in the small joints of the hands and feet.

Signs/Symptoms

- Joints are warm, swollen, painful, red
- Flu-like symptoms, including weight loss and loss of appetite
- Morning stiffness
- Deformity of joints over time

HOW IS ARTHRITIS TREATED?

The goals of arthritis treatment are to reduce pain and stiffness and maintain or increase movement. Treatment may include:

◆ Physical Activity

Physical activity—such as swimming, water aerobics, walking, and biking—helps keep your range of motion and muscle strength. It also prevents joint deformities. Set a regular time to exercise at least once or twice a day. Slowly increase activity.

Here are some tips:

- Check with your physician/nurse practitioner before beginning any exercise program.
- Exercise on good days AND bad days. Lower the number and force of exercises during periods of increased pain or swelling.
- Do not use exercise weights on sore joints.
- Balance periods of exercise with periods of rest.
- Always stretch before and after physical activity.

◆ Moist Heat

Moist heat can relieve joint stiffness, muscle tension, and pain. It relaxes tense muscles and increases blood flow. Do not use on swollen or inflamed joints.

Good sources of heat include:

- warm showers or baths
- moist towels heated in a microwave
- moist heating pad

Be careful not to burn your skin, especially if you have decreased feeling (for example, from diabetes or stroke). Do not apply heat for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

◆ Cold

Cold is best for red, hot, or swollen joints. It helps decrease swelling and pain. It relaxes tense muscles and has a numbing effect. Good sources of cold include:

- a bag of frozen peas
- an ice pack or plastic bag filled with ice and wrapped in a damp towel

Be careful of freezing your skin, especially if you have decreased feeling (for example, from diabetes or stroke). Do not apply ice for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

◆ Joint Protection

Protecting the joints means decreasing the wear and tear on a joint. Decreasing wear and tear will help protect the joint from more harm and deformity. Follow these suggestions to protect your joints:

- Avoid long periods in the same position.
- Decrease stress on joints by keeping good posture and maintaining a healthy body weight.
- Keep joints properly lined up (alignment).
- Remove weight from joint when very painful.
- Avoid overuse during flare-ups.
- Change activities to decrease joint stress.
- Avoid using braces or other mechanical devices that limit joint movement unless advised by a health care professional.

◆ Medications

Medications are given to decrease pain and inflammation. Which medications you take depend on the type of arthritis you have. Take medications ONLY after consulting your physician/nurse practitioner.

◆ Supplements

There have been scientific studies that show that the supplements glucosamine and chondroitin can be helpful in decreasing pain and increasing function for OA of the knee. There is some encouraging evidence that they will also help in OA of the hip. We do not yet know if they will help other joints. Talk to your pharmacist, physician, or nurse practitioner to be sure they are right for