

Osteoarthritis

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a common and sometimes painful condition that affects the structure of joints including the bone and cartilage (a rubber-like padding that covers and protects bones at the joints). Although it can occur in any joint, and in patients of any age, it usually occurs later in life and affects the hips and knees. It can also cause problems in the spine, shoulders, hands or any other joint.

Symptoms of osteoarthritis often change from day to day. Sometimes it is possible to have an acute flare-up (feeling worse than usual), which may be related to increased or unusual activity or changes in your routine. This does not mean that the arthritis has worsened, and the increased pain will most likely settle with time.

What are the symptoms?

Osteoarthritis symptoms can change from person to person and within the same person over time. Typical symptoms include:

- Stiffness
- Pain with movement
- Muscle weakness
- Reduced range of movement (unable to move as before)
- Clicking or cracking noises in the joint
- Feelings of low mood (or not feeling very happy)

Diagnosis

If you have joint pain it is important to see a qualified healthcare professional to diagnose your symptoms. Usually x-rays and scans are not required to diagnose osteoarthritis. Plain x-rays may be requested to rule out other conditions or to plan for surgery. An MRI scan is rarely needed.

Risk factors for osteoarthritis include being overweight, previous injury to the joint and increasing age.

Treatment

Most of the time, osteoarthritis can be well managed with some simple strategies that are best developed in conjunction with your doctor. Some patients eventually need joint replacement surgery. Your doctor will advise which treatments you need.

Home care

It is most important that you understand your condition and how to manage it appropriately. Your doctor can give you information on how to manage your condition, including how to pace and plan your activities to avoid flare-ups (when it feels more painful).

There are many ways to make life more comfortable:

- Regular exercise can reduce pain and improve function for most people
- Do not exercise a painful, swollen or hot joint. If an exercise causes pain, talk to your doctor.
- A physiotherapist can help you improve your muscle tone, reduce stiffness and keep you mobile. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist about the right exercises for you.
- Maintain a healthy weight to avoid excess pressure and wear on your joints. Ask your local doctor and/or see a dietician for advice on weight management.
- There is a wide range of tools (assistive technology and equipment) that can help with cooking, cleaning and other household chores. These can be found at larger pharmacies or discussed with an occupational therapist.
- Take simple pain relief such as paracetamol if necessary. Follow the instructions on the box.
- The effectiveness of many herbal remedies and nutritional supplements is not known. Ask your doctor for advice before taking any over-the-counter medication.

What to expect

- Most people lead a normal or near-normal life with osteoarthritis. Arthritis can be mild and well controlled. It does not always get worse as you get older.
- For some people, arthritis can cause deformed joints, which may lead to stiffness, severe pain and loss of function. Joint replacement surgery may be helpful for these people. Arthroscopies ('keyhole' surgery to clean out the joint) are not used to treat osteoarthritis of the knee.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Return to Cabrini ED if you:

- Have pain that does not improve with painkillers
- Have increased severe joint swelling
- Have increased stiffness
- Feel generally unwell with a fever
- Cannot function at home

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Contact Arthritis Victoria on 1800 011 041 or www.arthritisvic.org.au
- Contact Musculoskeletal Australia on 1800 263 265 or www.msk.org.au
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au