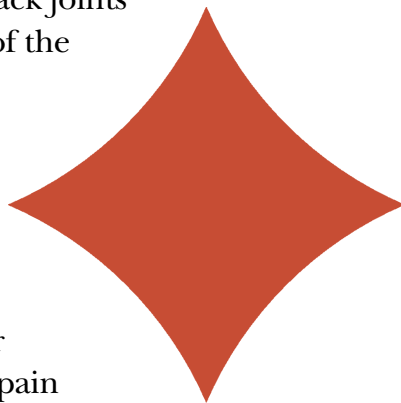


# AgePage

## Arthritis Advice

“Arthritis” is not just a word doctors use when they talk about painful, stiff joints. In fact, 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 forms of arthritis cause changes you can see and feel—swelling, warmth, and redness in your joints. In some the pain and swelling last only a short time, but are very bad. Other types cause less troublesome symptoms, but still slowly damage your joints.



## Common Kinds of Arthritis

Arthritis is one of the most common diseases in this country. Millions of adults and half of all people age 65 and older are troubled by this disease. Older people most often have osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, or gout.

**Osteoarthritis (OA)** is the most common type of arthritis in older people. OA starts when cartilage begins to become ragged and wears away. Cartilage is the tissue that pads bones in a joint. At OA’s worst, all of the cartilage in a joint wears away, leaving bones that rub against each other. You are most likely to have OA in your hands, neck, lower back, or the large weight-bearing joints of your body, such as knees and hips.

OA symptoms can range from stiffness and mild pain that comes and goes with activities like walking, bending, or stooping to severe joint pain that keeps on even when you rest or try to sleep. Sometimes OA causes your joints to feel stiff when you haven’t moved them in a while, like after riding in the car. But the stiffness goes away when you move the joint. In time OA can also

cause problems moving joints and sometimes disability if your back, knees, or hips are affected.

What causes OA? Growing older is what most often puts you at risk for OA. Other than that, scientists think the cause depends on which part of the body is involved. For example, OA in the hands or hips may run in families. 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. In RA, that means your body attacks the lining of a joint just as it would if it were trying to protect you from injury or disease. For example, if you had a splinter in your finger, the finger would become inflamed—painful, red, and swollen. RA leads to inflammation in your joints. This inflammation causes pain, swelling, and stiffness that lasts for hours. This can often happen in many different joints at the same time. You might not even be able to move the joint.



People with RA often don't feel well. They may be tired or run a fever. People of any age can develop RA, and it is more common in women.

RA can attack almost any joint in the body, including the joints in the fingers, wrists, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, ankles, feet, and neck. If you have RA in a joint on one side of the body, the same joint on the other side of your body will probably have RA also. RA not only destroys joints. It can also attack organs such as the heart, muscles, blood vessels, nervous system, and eyes.

**Gout** is one of the most painful forms of arthritis. An attack can begin when crystals of uric acid form in the connective tissue and/or joint spaces. These deposits lead to swelling, redness, heat, pain, and stiffness in the joint. Gout attacks often follow eating foods like shellfish, liver, dried beans, peas, anchovies, or gravy. Using alcohol, being overweight, and certain medications may also make gout worse. In older people, some blood pressure medicines can also increase your chance of a gout attack.

Gout is most often a problem in the big toe, but it can affect other joints, including your ankle, elbow,

knee, wrist, hand, or other toes. Swelling may cause the skin to pull tightly around the joint and make the area red or purple and very tender. Your doctor might suggest blood tests and x-rays. He or she might also take a sample of fluid from your joint while you are having an attack.

Other forms of arthritis include psoriatic arthritis (in people with the skin condition psoriasis), ankylosing spondylitis (which mostly affects the spine), reactive arthritis (arthritis that occurs as a reaction to another illness in the body), and arthritis in the temporomandibular joint (where the jaw joins the skull).

## Warning Signs

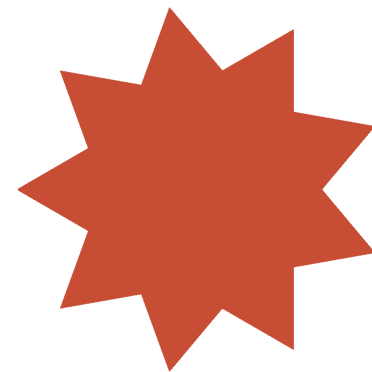
You might have some form of arthritis if you have:

- ◆ Lasting joint pain,
- ◆ Joint swelling,
- ◆ Joint stiffness,
- ◆ Tenderness or pain when touching a joint,
- ◆ Problems using or moving a joint normally, or
- ◆ Warmth and redness in a joint.

If any one of these symptoms lasts longer than 2 weeks, see your regular doctor or a rheumatologist. If you have a fever, feel physically ill, suddenly have a swollen joint, or have problems using your joint, see your doctor sooner. Your health care provider will ask questions about your symptoms and do a physical exam. He or she may take x-rays or do lab tests before suggesting a treatment plan.

## Treating Arthritis

Each kind of arthritis is handled a little differently, but there are some common treatment choices. Rest, exercise, eating a healthy, well-balanced diet, and learning the right way to use and protect your joints are key 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. You can also find gadgets to help you open jars and bottles or to turn the door knobs in your house more easily.



In addition, there are also medicines that can help with the pain and swelling. Acetaminophen can safely ease arthritis pain. Some NSAIDs (**n**onsteroidal **a**nti-**i**nflam-**m**atory **d**rugs), like ibuprofen and naproxen, are sold without a prescription. Other NSAIDs must be prescribed by a doctor. But in 2005, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warned people about the possible side effects of some NSAIDs, both those sold with or without a prescription. You should 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. You can also check with the FDA for more information about these drugs.

Some treatments are special for each common type of arthritis.

**Osteoarthritis.** Medicines can help you control OA pain. Rest and exercise will make it easier for you to move your joints. Keeping your weight down is a good idea. If pain from OA in your knee is very bad, your doctor might give you shots in the joint. This can help you to move your knee and get about

without pain. Some people have surgery to repair or replace damaged joints.

**Rheumatoid Arthritis.** With treatment, the pain and swelling from RA will get better, and joint damage might slow down or stop. You may find it easier to move around, and you will just feel better. In addition to pain and anti-inflammatory medicines, your doctor might suggest anti-rheumatic drugs, called DMARDs (**disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs**). These can slow damage from the disease. Medicines like prednisone, known as corticosteroids, can ease swelling while you wait for DMARDs to take effect. Another type of drug, biologic response modifiers, blocks the damage done by the immune system. They sometimes help people with mild-to-moderate RA when other treatments have not worked.

**Gout.** 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. The most

common treatment for an acute attack of gout uses NSAIDs or corticosteroids like prednisone. This reduces swelling, so you may start to feel better within a few hours after treatment. The attack usually goes away fully within a few days. If you have had several attacks, your doctor can prescribe medicines to prevent future ones.

## Exercise Can Help

Along with taking the right medicine and properly resting your joints, exercise is a good way to stay fit, keep muscles strong, and control 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, 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 improve the overall working of your body. Aerobic exercise also may lessen swelling in some joints.

The National Institute on Aging (NIA) has a free 80-page booklet on how to start and stick with a safe exercise program. The Institute also has a 48-minute companion video. See the last panel of this *Age Page* for more information. Before beginning any exercise program, talk with your doctor or health care worker.

## 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 applying heat or cold, 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 these joints with artificial (man-made) ones. In the most common operations, doctors replace hips and knees.

## Unproven Remedies

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, or
- ◆ The label has no directions for use or warning about side effects.

## Areas for Further Research

Recent studies suggest that Chinese acupuncture may ease OA pain for some people. Others try dietary supplements, such as glucosamine and chondroitin. Research now shows

that these two dietary supplements may help lessen your OA pain. Scientists are studying alternative treatments, such as these two supplements, to find out how they work and if they keep the joint changes caused by arthritis from getting worse. More information is needed before anyone can be sure.

## Talk to Your Doctor

Most importantly, do not take for granted that your pain and arthritis are just part of growing older normally. You and your doctor can work together to safely lessen the pain and stiffness that might be troubling you and to prevent more serious damage to your joints.

## For More Information

Here are some helpful Federal and non-Federal resources.

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

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

**National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases**  
NIAMS Information Clearinghouse  
1 AMS Circle  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3675  
877-22-NIAMS (877-226-4267, toll-free)  
301-565-2966 (TTY)  
*www.niams.nih.gov*

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

1800 Century Place  
Suite 250  
Atlanta, GA 30345-4300  
404-633-3777  
*www.rheumatology.org*

### **Arthritis Foundation**

P.O. Box 7669  
Atlanta, GA 30357-0669  
800-568-4045 (toll-free)  
or check the telephone directory  
for your local chapter  
*www.arthritis.org*



To get the NIA's exercise book or video or for more information on health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on  
Aging Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

*www.nia.nih.gov*

To order publications (in English or Spanish) or sign up for regular email alerts, visit *www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation*.

Visit **NIHSeniorHealth.gov**

(*www.nihseniorhealth.gov*), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults.

There are also special features that make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



**National Institute on Aging**

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