

Arthritis: what is it?

The term "arthritis" refers to over 100 different conditions that affect the joints (the places where two bones meet). Some forms of arthritis may also affect other areas of the body, such as the skin, heart, or kidneys. Often, arthritis is a long-lasting disease, affecting people over many years. Symptoms often include pain, stiffness, swelling, redness, and heat in the joints.

Although the disease process for all forms of arthritis differs from person to person and from disease to disease, all types of arthritis have certain features in common, which sometimes makes them difficult to accurately diagnose. Regardless of the type of arthritis, it is important to diagnose early so that treatment can be started.

The two most common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA), also known as *degenerative arthritis* or *degenerative joint disease*, is the most common type of arthritis, affecting 1 in 10 Canadians. Although OA can develop at any age, it usually develops after the age of 45, affecting both men and women equally. Cartilage deterioration in one or more joints is responsible for OA, leading to joint damage, pain, and stiffness. OA usually affects the knees, hands, feet, spine, and hips.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects approximately 1% of Canadians. It usually strikes between the ages of 25 and 50. Women are at least twice as likely as men to get RA. RA is progressive, which means that it gets worse over time. Symptoms, which include stiffness, swelling, pain and joint damage, are a result of the inflammation of the joints in the body. It may also affect other areas of the body, including the heart, eyes, and lungs. RA is called an *autoimmune disease* because it is your body's own immune system that is fighting itself. RA can cause severe disability in some people, but it can be managed through medications and other treatments.



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Other types of arthritis

Psoriatic arthritis usually occurs between the ages of 20 and 50. Men and women are equally likely to get psoriatic arthritis. Psoriatic arthritis usually starts out as psoriasis, a condition where areas of the skin become inflamed and covered with silvery grey scales. The fingernails may also be damaged. In some people, arthritis may show up first. The joints most often affected include the knees, ankles, wrists, fingers, and toes. The spine and *sacroiliac joints* (the joints between the spine and hips) may also be affected.

Infectious arthritis affects both men and women, and can occur at any age, causing joint inflammation (swelling and pain). A germ such as a bacterium, a virus, or a fungus causes infectious arthritis by travelling into a joint, usually large joints such as shoulders, hips, and knees, where it causes inflammation. Infectious arthritis may also affect smaller joints of the fingers and ankles. Usually, if treated early, the symptoms are not long-lasting.

Children can get arthritis

Arthritis is not just a "seniors' disease." **Juvenile arthritis** is a general term for all types of arthritis that affect children. This includes many types of arthritis, such as **juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (JRA)**, childhood forms of lupus, ankylosing spondylitis, and others.

JRA affects children 16 years of age or younger, and is the most common form of arthritis in children. Symptoms usually do not last a lifetime and tend to disappear after several months or years.



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Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA), also known as *degenerative arthritis* or *degenerative joint disease*, is the most common type of arthritis. It affects 10% of Canadians. Although OA can develop at any age, it usually develops after the age of 45, affecting both men and women equally.

Joints are where two bones meet. The ends of each bone are covered by a tough, elastic material called *cartilage*. Cartilage protects the ends of the bones from damaging each other when they move.

In OA, the cartilage deteriorates, leading to joint damage, pain, and stiffness. OA is often referred to as a "wear and tear" disease because over time, cartilage can weaken and break down, sometimes developing cracks and holes. Pieces of damaged cartilage can break off and irritate the joints or the tissues nearby. The joint pain and swelling caused by OA can make it painful and difficult to move.

Although any joint can be affected in OA, weight-bearing joints of the hips, knees, feet, and spine are the most common. Those less commonly affected are the non-weight-bearing joints of the fingers and the joint at the base of the thumb. Other joints are not usually affected by OA, unless they either have been injured or have experienced unusual stress.

What causes pain in OA?

Since there are no nerve endings in cartilage, the cartilage itself doesn't actually hurt. However, all the surrounding tissues such as *tendons* (inflexible cords that connect muscle to bone or other tissue) and *ligaments* (slightly elastic bands of tissue which connect the ends of bones and prevent excessive movement of the joint) as well as bone can become *inflamed* (swollen, irritated, and painful). As the cartilage damage progresses, movements become more difficult and the other tissues such as tendons and ligaments must work harder to help keep the joints moving. Because tendons and ligaments are not designed to do this work, they become overworked, resulting in more inflammation in the joint. Eventually, the wearing of the cartilage may cause the bones to rub together, causing more pain. Bony growths (called *spurs* or *osteophytes*) that form as the bone thickens, also rub together, causing additional pain. This is especially common in weight-bearing joints like the hips, knees, and spine.

What are the usual symptoms of OA? Will they get worse over time?

The most common symptoms of OA are joint pain, swelling, and stiffness. These symptoms last for at least two weeks. In addition to the most commonly affected joints of the hips, knees, feet and spine, smaller joints such as those of the fingers and thumbs can also develop OA.

OA is a progressive disease, and symptoms usually develop slowly, commonly involving the area around the joint. Over time, as the damage progresses, it may become painful to move the joint. It is common to hear grating sounds as the roughened surfaces of the cartilage rub together, creating bumps or swelling, especially in the small joints of fingers and feet.

What causes OA?

Although the exact cause is unknown, the older you are, the greater your chances of having OA. Heredity also may play a role, since some people who have OA also have other family members with it. Since being overweight can put stress on joints, it can increase your chances of getting OA, especially in the weight-bearing joints such as hips and knees. Overuse of the joint or repeated injury from work or sports can cause excessive or unusual wear and damage of the joints, and cause OA to develop. Joint damage from other types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, can also increase the risk of OA.

How might OA affect my daily activities?

In addition to pain, inflammation, and visible joint deformities, joint damage from arthritis can make everyday activities such as walking, using a computer keyboard, or brushing your teeth a challenge.

Is there a cure for OA?

There is no cure for OA and treatments vary depending on the location and severity of the disease. The available treatments can help manage the condition, reduce pain and stiffness, and improve joint mobility. Treatments include medications, physiotherapy, exercise, weight loss, and surgery. Medications used for osteoarthritis include painkillers (*analgesics*) such as acetaminophen, *non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs*, *corticosteroid* injections into the joint, and capsaicin cream. Surgery is a last resort, and it is usually reserved for severe cases where the entire joint (often a hip or a knee) is worn, and needs replacement.



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