

# Arthritis Answers



**Symptoms, treatment,  
prevention and risk**



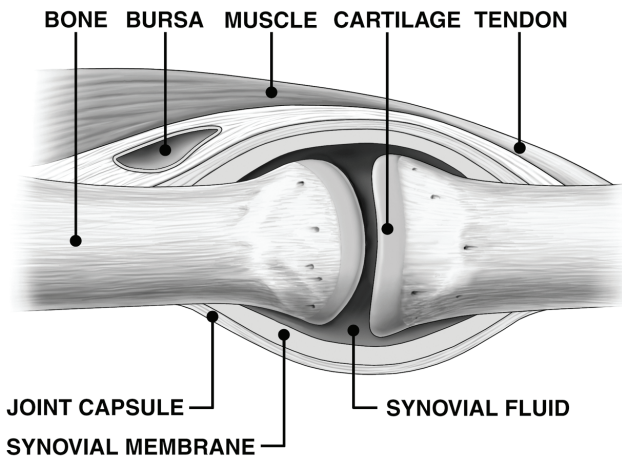
**Arthritis  
Foundation**<sup>SM</sup>

## Is It Arthritis?

Chances are you or someone you know has arthritis. Arthritis is a general term for more than 100 types of arthritis and related conditions. More than 52 million adults and 300,000 children in the United States have some type of arthritis.

The word “arthritis” literally means joint inflammation. Arthritis can cause pain, stiffness and swelling in or around joints. Joints are where bones meet, such as your knee. The ends of the bones are covered by cartilage, a spongy material that keeps bones from rubbing together. The joint is enclosed in a capsule and lined with tissue called the synovium. This lining releases a slippery fluid that helps the joint move smoothly and easily. Muscles and tendons support the joint and help you move.

Different types of arthritis can affect one or more parts of a joint to produce pain and swelling,



Healthy joint

which can limit use of the joint. Certain types of arthritis also can affect other parts of the body, such as the skin, eyes, mouth and internal organs (e.g., the heart, lungs or kidneys).

Arthritis is usually chronic, meaning that it lasts a long time. For many people, it does not go away. Pain and stiffness usually will be worse in the morning or after periods of inactivity. In some types of arthritis, the skin over the joint may appear swollen and red and feel warm to the touch.

With some types of arthritis, you may have fatigue, a poor appetite or fever. If you have any of these signs for more than two weeks, see your doctor. These symptoms can develop suddenly or slowly. But there are many things you can do now to avoid arthritis or to reduce pain and keep moving and prevent joint and organ damage.

### What Causes Arthritis?

The cause of most types of arthritis is unknown. Scientists are studying several major factors that are thought to be important in arthritis. These factors include: genes; the role of inflammation and the immune system in causing joint damage; and lifestyle factors, including injury to joints. The importance of

### Warning Signs of Arthritis

- Pain
- Stiffness
- Occasional swelling and/or tenderness
- Difficulty moving a joint
- Redness around a joint

these factors varies, depending on the type of arthritis.

## How Is Arthritis Diagnosed?

It's important to find out what type of arthritis you have because treatments are different for the various types of arthritis. Early diagnosis and treatment are important to help slow or prevent damage to joints that can occur during the first few years with certain types of arthritis.

Your primary-care doctor is your best first stop for getting a diagnosis. For some types of arthritis, this doctor may be the only one you need to see to manage your arthritis. But for



To find a rheumatologist in your area, visit our specialized search tool at [arthritisresourcefinder.org](https://arthritisresourcefinder.org)

## What to Tell Your Doctor

- Where it hurts
- When it hurts
- When it first began to hurt
- How long it has hurt
- If you have any swelling
- What daily tasks are hard to do
- If you have ever hurt the joint in an accident or overused it on the job or in a hobby or sport
- If anyone in your family has had similar problems

## What Your Doctor Should Tell You

- If you have arthritis or a related condition
- What type of arthritis it is
- What to expect
- What you can do about it

others, you may need to see a rheumatologist, a physician who specializes in diagnosis and treatment of arthritis and related conditions.

When you see your doctor for the first time about your joint pain, expect at least three things to happen before you get an arthritis diagnosis:

- First, your doctor will talk to you about your symptoms and medical history.
- Next, your doctor will conduct a physical examination.
- Finally, your doctor may order X-rays and laboratory tests.

Your doctor will examine your joints to check for swelling and tender points, to see what movements cause pain, and to see if your joints move through their normal ranges of motion. Your doctor also will check for other signs that may be found in some forms of arthritis, including skin rashes, mouth sores, muscle weakness, eye problems or involvement of internal organs, such as the heart or lungs.

The results from your medical history, physical exam and tests help your doctor match your symptoms to the pattern of a specific disease or rule out other diseases.

Symptoms for some types of arthritis develop

slowly and may appear similar to other types in its early stages. It may take several visits before your doctor can tell what type of arthritis you have.

### Can Arthritis Be Prevented?

There are steps you can take to reduce your risk for getting certain types of arthritis or to reduce disability if you already have arthritis.

Doctors believe some people can reduce their risk of developing some types of arthritis or delay its onset by following these guidelines:

- Maintain a healthy weight or lose extra weight.
- Stay physically active.
- Avoid joint injury.
- Adjust jobs that require repetitive joint movement.
- Don't smoke.



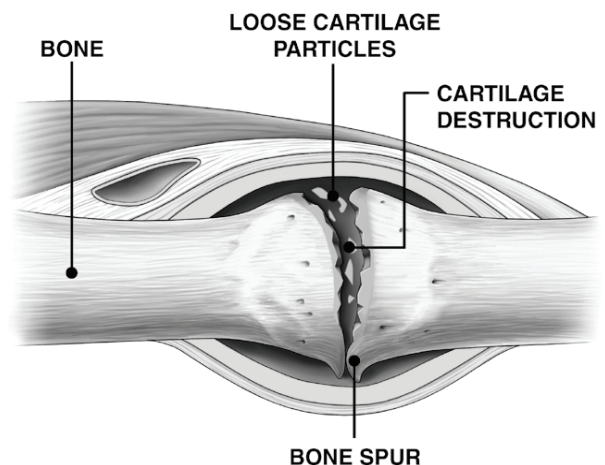
## What Type of Arthritis Do I Have?

With more than 100 types of arthritis and related conditions, it is important to know which type you have so it can be treated properly. If you don't know which type you have, make an appointment with your doctor or ask during your next visit.

The most common types of arthritis and related conditions are described on the following pages.

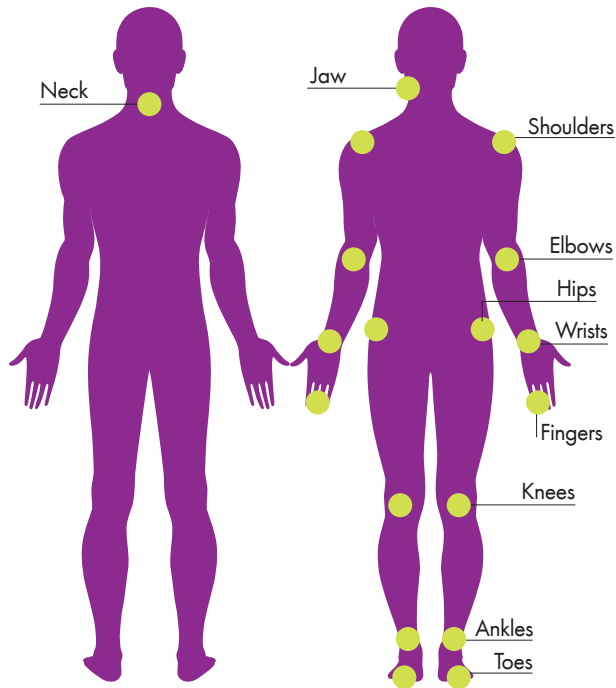
### Osteoarthritis

The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis, or OA. OA affects about 27 million Americans. OA is sometimes called degenerative arthritis or degenerative joint disease because it causes the breakdown of cartilage and bones over time, causing pain and stiffness. OA usually affects the fingers and weight-bearing joints, including the knees, hips, back and neck, but it can affect other joints and the hands. It affects both men and women and usually occurs after age 44.



Joint with osteoarthritis





Some of the joints that may be affected by RA

## Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis, or RA, is an autoimmune disease. In autoimmune diseases, the body's immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue, causing inflammation of the joints. The exact cause of the disease is unknown. Inflammation begins in the joint lining (synovium) and, over time, leads to damage of both cartilage and bone. Rheumatoid arthritis often affects the same joints on both sides of the body. Hands, wrists, feet, knees, ankles, shoulders, neck, jaw and elbows can all have RA. RA affects about 1.5 million Americans and is more common in women than in men.

## Psoriatic Arthritis

You may know psoriasis as a disease affecting the skin. But did you know that about 30 percent of people with psoriasis also have an inflammatory form of arthritis called psoriatic arthritis? Psoriasis



usually shows up first. The disease usually appears between the ages of 30 and 55 in people who have psoriasis, but it can be diagnosed during childhood. Unlike many autoimmune diseases, men and women are equally at risk for developing this condition.

## Lupus

Lupus is another autoimmune disease that affects the skin and joints. In some people, lupus also affects the internal organs such as the kidneys, lungs or heart. Lupus affects women about eight to 10 times more often than men. Symptoms often first appear in women between ages 18 and 45. Some of the common symptoms include a rash over the cheeks and across the bridge of the nose, sun sensitivity and joint pain. Lupus occurs more often



To learn more about these and many other types of arthritis, visit [www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis](http://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis).

in African Americans than in Caucasians and also may occur more frequently in Asian and Latino populations.

## Gout

Gout occurs when the body produces too much of a substance called uric acid. Gout also happens when your body can't get rid of uric acid, leading to high levels of uric acid in the blood. This may lead to the formation of uric acid crystals in a joint, which causes severe pain and swelling. Gout most commonly affects the big toes, ankles and knees. More men than women have gout. Certain foods (such as sardines, anchovies and organ meats) and alcohol, especially beer, can raise the body's uric acid level.

## Fibromyalgia

In contrast to arthritis, which is a disease of the joints, fibromyalgia does not affect joints but instead is a condition that involves widespread pain in the muscles and soft tissues. People with fibromyalgia often have fatigue, disturbed sleep, low mood and stiffness. Fibromyalgia is a common condition that usually affects women. It does not cause muscle or joint damage.



Joint with gout

## Other Common Arthritis-Related Conditions

**Low back pain** can be caused by a back strain or injury, or by certain types of arthritis, such as osteoarthritis and ankylosing spondylitis.

**Bursitis and tendinitis** may be caused by irritation from injuring or overusing a joint, but in many cases occurs without a known cause. Bursitis affects a small sac called the bursa that helps cushion the muscles and tendons surrounding a joint. Tendinitis affects the tendons that attach muscle to bone.

**Osteoporosis** causes bone to lose mass and become thin and brittle. This can lead to painful fractures, rounded shoulders and loss of height. It does not directly affect the joints as arthritis does. Osteoporosis affects more than 40 million Americans, most of whom are women. It is the major cause of bone fractures in postmenopausal women and senior citizens, including men. People with some forms of arthritis (such as rheumatoid arthritis or lupus) or who take medications, such as corticosteroids are at risk for developing osteoporosis.

## Kids Get Arthritis, Too

Arthritis is not just a disease for adults. There are more than 300,000 children under the age of 16 in the U.S. who have arthritis. Juvenile arthritis is an umbrella term that refers to a group of rheumatic diseases and conditions affecting children. Juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) is the most common type of juvenile arthritis. Like rheumatoid arthritis, it is an autoimmune disease.

To learn more about juvenile arthritis, visit [www.kidsgetarthritis.org](http://www.kidsgetarthritis.org).

## How Is Arthritis Treated?

Once you have a diagnosis, your doctor can work with you to develop a treatment plan. Your treatment plan likely will include multiple approaches to reducing your pain and stiffness, fighting inflammation and keeping you moving. These approaches may include medications and medical treatments as well as self-management approaches, such as diet and exercise.

Finding the right treatment plan may take time. Be sure to let your doctor know if a treatment is not working. Your treatment may change as your arthritis changes. Treatments for arthritis can be divided into several categories, which are described on the following pages.

### Medication

Many different drugs are used to treat arthritis and related diseases. The ones you should take will depend on the type of arthritis you have. Most arthritis medications are designed to relieve pain and/or reduce inflammation. Some arthritis medications are available without a prescription, or over-the-counter (OTC). They typically come in pill form, however there are some topical creams and gels, too. Other medications require a prescription from your doctor. These medications many come in pill or gel form, or be self injected. They may also be injected or infused in a doctor's office or hospital.

It is very important that your doctors are aware of all the medications you are taking, both prescription and OTC. Be sure also to tell your doctor about any supplements you are taking.

## Types of Arthritis Medications

There are a number of classes of medications that are used to treat arthritis. The following list is a sampling of the types of medications your doctor may recommend to treat your arthritis.

- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** reduce pain and swelling. Available in both prescription and nonprescription strengths.
- **Corticosteroids** reduce severe pain and inflammation. Available by prescription. May be given in pill form or by injection into the joint or surrounding areas.
- **Analgesics** provide pain relief. Available OTC for mild to moderate pain. Opiate analgesics are available by prescription for more severe pain. Also available in topical form.
- **Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs)** reduce inflammation, slow down the disease process and limit joint damage in inflammatory types of arthritis. Available by prescription in pill form or by injection. May take weeks or months to work.
- **Biologics** reduce inflammation, slow or halt the disease process and limit joint damage in inflammatory types of arthritis. Available by prescription by injection or IV infusion.
- **Antidepressants** provide pain relief for people with some types of arthritis and related conditions, like fibromyalgia.



Learn about all the different medications used to treat arthritis and related conditions with the *Arthritis Today Drug Guide*. Visit [www.arthritis.org/drugguide](http://www.arthritis.org/drugguide).

## Medication Side Effects

All medications – even ones you buy without a prescription – have the potential for side effects. Arthritis medications are no exception.

It is impossible to list all of the side effects of arthritis medications, because different drugs cause different side effects, and different people react differently to medications. To learn about the benefits and risks of nearly 100 types of arthritis medications, go to the *Arthritis Today Drug Guide* at [www.arthritis.org/drugguide](http://www.arthritis.org/drugguide).

## Physical Activity

Being physically active every day can keep you moving and independent. It lessens pain, increases range of motion, reduces fatigue, prevents weight gain and helps you look and feel better. People with arthritis should try to be active or exercise at least 30 minutes five days a week in addition to their everyday activities. Physical therapists and exercise physiologists can assist in designing exercises that minimize joint injury.

## Heat and Cold Therapies

Applying heat or cold treatments over joints or muscles may give you short-term relief from pain and stiffness. You also can use heat or cold to help prepare for exercise. Heat helps relax aching muscles. Sources of heat include heat packs, hot tubs or heated pools. Don't use heat with rubs or creams because this can cause skin burns. Cold numbs the area so you don't feel as much pain and can decrease swelling and inflammation. You can apply cold with ice, cold packs or bags of frozen vegetables. It's important to use heat and cold

## Arthritis Foundation Resources Can Help

The Arthritis Foundation offers several tools to help you live better with arthritis. These resources include:

- **Your Exercise Solution (YES) Online Tool** – a unique online tool that helps you create a personalized activity plan to ease your pain based on your specific joint requirements. Check it out at [YourExerciseSolution.org](http://YourExerciseSolution.org).
- **Arthritis Resource Finder** – a specialized online search tool that can help you find local health care providers, medical equipment suppliers and fitness programs, plus much more. Learn more at [ArthritisResourceFinder.org](http://ArthritisResourceFinder.org).
- **The Better Living Toolkit** – a comprehensive kit that includes a health tracker and Arthritis Foundation publications to help you get a better understanding of your disease. Get yours at [BetterLivingToolkit.org](http://BetterLivingToolkit.org).

safely. Don't use either treatment for more than 20 minutes at a time. Let your skin return to a normal temperature between applications.

## Pacing Your Activities

Pacing yourself saves energy by switching between periods of activity and periods of rest. Pacing helps protect your joints from the stress of repeated tasks and helps reduce fatigue. Alternate heavy or repeated tasks with easy ones. Change tasks often so that you don't hold joints in one position for a long time. Plan rest breaks during your daily activities.



## The Four-Pound Rule

Research has shown that every excess pound you weigh places an extra four pounds of pressure on your knees, so losing even a few pounds can make a huge difference if you are overweight.

## Joint Protection

You can learn to protect your joints by using them in ways that avoid excess stress. Protecting your joints makes it easier to do daily tasks. An occupational therapist can help you learn to use your joints in the best way to avoid excess stress on them. Use larger or stronger joints to carry things. For instance, carry your grocery bags using your forearms or palms instead of your fingers. You may also benefit from assistive devices to help keep pressure off certain joints. Assistive devices may include canes, crutches or walkers.

## Weight Control

Weight control means staying close to your recommended weight or losing weight if you are overweight now. Weight control can reduce your risk for developing osteoarthritis in the knees. And if you already have knee OA, losing weight may lessen pain by reducing stress on your joints. Exercising and reducing calories will help you lose weight. If you need to lose a lot of weight, work with your doctor and a registered or licensed dietitian to find the best weight-loss program for you.

## Complementary Therapies

Complementary therapies, including supplements, vitamins, massage, yoga and



For more information about complementary or natural therapies, visit [www.arthritis.org/naturaltreatments](http://www.arthritis.org/naturaltreatments).

acupuncture, may also provide relief for you. Some of these nonconventional methods have been shown to be helpful for people with arthritis.

## Surgery

Most people with arthritis will never need surgery. However, surgery can help in cases when other treatments have failed. It can reduce pain and improve function. Two common types of surgery for people with arthritis are synovectomy and total joint replacement. Synovectomy is the removal of the thickened joint membrane (synovium) that causes damage to joints in inflammatory forms of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis. Joint replacement replaces the damaged joint with an artificial joint. These procedures are usually effective in relieving pain and helping you maintain activities of daily living.

## Self-Management Skills

You are the best manager of your arthritis. Being a good arthritis manager means understanding your disease and knowing what to expect. It also means planning your activities for when you feel best and learning to work with your doctor as a team. You can help yourself feel better by learning to manage your symptoms and how they affect your daily activities. You also can learn skills to help manage how arthritis affects your emotions and your family.



For more information on joint surgery, visit [www.arthritis.org/jointsurgery](http://www.arthritis.org/jointsurgery).



## The Arthritis Foundation is the Champion of Yes.

We lead the fight for the arthritis community and help you conquer your everyday battles through life-changing information and resources, access to optimal care, advancements in science and community connections.

**Go to [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)  
or call 800-283-7800.**

**Our goal is to help you:**



**Learn, be inspired and connect.**

Subscribe to **Arthritis Today** magazine to get information on everyday life with arthritis, the latest health news, tools to help you chart a winning course and much more. Go to [arthritis.org/subscribe](http://arthritis.org/subscribe).

**Contact your local office about resources and events** going on where you live. Go to

[arthritis.org](http://arthritis.org), click the **Local Offices** tab at the top and enter your ZIP code.

**Raise funds to conquer arthritis** in our annual events, Walk to Cure Arthritis and Jingle Bell Run. Visit [arthritis.org/events](http://arthritis.org/events).

**Talk about your condition.** You're not alone when you connect with our community. Visit [arthritis.org/community](http://arthritis.org/community).

**Make your voice be heard.** Go to [arthritis.org/advocate](http://arthritis.org/advocate) and become an Arthritis Foundation Advocate for better access to health care.

## Acknowledgements

The Arthritis Foundation appreciates the contributions of and reviews by the following:

**Roy Altman, MD**, professor emeritus, Division of Rheumatology, Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, Los Angeles

**Susan Richmond, MS, PA-C**, clinical assistant professor, Bryant University, Smithfield, Rhode Island

**Scott Zashin, MD, FACP FACP**, clinical professor of internal medicine, Division of Rheumatology, Southwestern Medical School, University of Texas, Dallas



# Personalized, One-On-One Support to Get the **Help** You Need



Call the toll-free **Arthritis Foundation Helpline** to speak with an arthritis information specialist. Arthritis information specialists can help you navigate your routine and complex situations with one-on-one guidance and counseling.

## Get answers about:

- Access to care
- Medication and co-pay assistance
- Insurance coverage
- Support groups
- Veteran benefits
- And much more!

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**Call 844-571-HELP toll-free  
to get the help you need.**

Engage with the Arthritis Foundation community on  
Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube.

