What is osteoarthritis (OA)?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a condition that affects the whole joint including bone, cartilage, ligaments and muscles. Osteoarthritis may include:

- inflammation of the tissue around a joint
- damage to joint cartilage - this is the protective cushion on the ends of your bones which allows a joint to move smoothly
- bony spurs growing around the edge of a joint
- deterioration of ligaments (the tough bands that hold your joint together) and tendons (cords that attach muscles to bones).

OA can affect any joint but occurs most often in the knees, hips, finger joints and big toe. OA can develop at any age but tends to be more common in people aged over 40 years or those who have had joint injuries.

Osteoarthritis is different to osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition where the bones become fragile and brittle, causing them to break more easily.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will diagnose OA from your symptoms and a physical examination. An x-ray may show the narrowing and changes in the shape of your joint. However x-rays do not diagnose how much trouble you will have. An x-ray that shows joint damage does not always mean you will have a lot of pain or problems. On the other hand your joint may be very painful despite x-rays being normal. Blood tests are only helpful to rule out other types of arthritis.

What will happen to me?

The impact of OA on your normal activities and lifestyle depends on which joints are affected. However the outlook for most people with OA is very positive. For many people OA will be mild and not cause major problems. OA of the hip and knee can sometimes cause severe disability and surgery to replace joints may be necessary. Joint surgery is usually only an option if less invasive treatments, such as weight loss, exercise, and medicines, have failed to control your symptoms.

Is there a cure for OA?

Currently there is no cure for OA. While there are treatments that can effectively control symptoms, you should be wary of products or therapies that claim to cure OA.
What treatments are there for OA?
Treatments for OA vary depending on which joints are affected and the severity of your condition. There is no way of predicting exactly which treatment will work best for you. Each treatment has its own benefits and risks. Your doctor may need to trial several different treatments before finding the one that is right for you.

In general terms, treatment usually includes:

- a weight loss program, if you are overweight
- an exercise program tailored to your condition and ability
- pain relief, using medicines such as paracetamol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), as well as newer psychological approaches
- devices such as braces, walking sticks, and insoles
- joint replacement surgery, if your symptoms are no longer controlled with other therapies, including weight loss.

Your local Arthritis Office has information sheets on physical activity, healthy eating, medicines and surgery.

What can I do?
See your doctor for treatment and advice. Your doctor will help you get the right treatment to manage your symptoms. See the Working with your healthcare team information sheet.

Learn about OA and play an active role in your treatment.
Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below.

Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

Learn ways to manage pain. See the Dealing with pain information sheet.

Stay active. Exercise is strongly recommended for people with OA. It keeps your joints and muscles healthy and flexible and prevents other health problems. You may find it useful to see a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist for advice. See the Physical activity and Working with your healthcare team information sheets.

Have a healthy diet. There is no diet that will cure OA, but a diet aimed at maintaining an ideal body weight is recommended. See the Healthy eating information sheet.

Balance your life. Learn about equipment that make daily tasks easier and how to balance rest and activity. See the Saving energy information sheet.

Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. As there is currently no cure for OA, it is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the Arthritis and emotions information sheet.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Learn about OA and your treatment options.
There are many things you can do to live well with OA.

For more information:

www.MyJointPain.org.au is a new interactive website to help people with osteoarthritis better manage their symptoms. It provides information and advice from experts as well as links to healthcare providers in your local area who can assist with care.

This site has been created by Arthritis Australia in partnership with the Bupa Health Foundation.


Lorig, Kate Fries, James 2006, The arthritis helpbook: A tested self- management program for coping with arthritis and fibromyalgia, Da Capo Lifelong, Cambridge, MA.

Other Websites: Arthritis Research UK www.arthritisresearchuk.org
American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org
Arthritis Foundation (US) www.arthritis.org

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The Australian General Practice Network, Australian Physiotherapy Association, Australian Practice Nurses Association, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners contributed to the development of this information sheet. The Australian Government has provided funding to support this project.

Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis

Helpline 1800 011 041 www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Disclaimer: This sheet is published by Arthritis Australia for information purposes only and should not be used in place of medical advice.