

# Health Bulletin

## Osteoarthritis and older adults



Arthritis is one of the most common diseases in the country. Millions of adults and half of all people aged 65 and older are troubled by this disease. One of the most common forms of arthritis affecting older people is osteoarthritis. Although there is no cure, there are ways to manage the condition.

### What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a common chronic condition that affects joints of the body including bone, cartilage, ligaments and muscles. It can affect any joint but most often occurs in the knees, hips, finger joints, spine and big toe. Levels of pain and loss of function vary between individuals.

### Symptoms

The symptoms of osteoarthritis can vary from person to person. Osteoarthritis tends to come on slowly, over months or even years and common symptoms include:

- Stiffness.
- Pain associated with movement.
- Muscle weakness.
- Joint instability.
- Reduced range of movement.
- Sounds within the joints (clicking, grating).
- Feelings of low mood.

These symptoms may affect your ability to do normal daily activities, such as walking, climbing stairs and opening jars.

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## Risk factors

- Excess weight or obesity.
- A previous significant joint injury.
- Repetitive kneeling, squatting or climbing.
- Repetitive heavy lifting.
- Increasing age.
- Family history of osteoarthritis.

## Diagnosis

Your doctor will diagnose osteoarthritis from your symptoms and a physical examination. X-rays are sometimes needed to confirm the diagnosis or to assist with planning interventions, such as surgery. A magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is rarely required. If you have any symptoms of osteoarthritis it is important to act quickly and seek treatment before the condition gets worse and long-term damage is caused.

## Management

Currently there is no cure for osteoarthritis. Management is the best plan of action. Management of osteoarthritis will vary depending on which joints are affected and the severity of your condition. Your doctor may need to trial several different management methods before finding the one that is right for you. Your doctor should provide you with a management plan and monitor your condition regularly.

Management can include:

- A weight loss program, if you are overweight.
- An exercise program tailored to your condition and ability. Appropriate exercise may include strengthening, stretching and a balance program that could be individual or group-based. Examples include swimming or warm water exercises, tai chi, walking or Nordic walking (walking with Nordic Poles), chair exercises, weights and dancing.

- Pain management, using medicines such as paracetamol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, as well as learning to change the way you think about, and react to, pain.
- Devices such as braces, walking sticks, and shoe insoles.
- Joint replacement surgery, if your symptoms are no longer controlled with other therapies.

**Remember:** exercise can help to reduce pain, increase muscle strength, improve joint range of joint motion, balance, physical function and wellbeing, and prevent loss of fitness and muscle wasting.

Sources: Arthritis Australia, Arthritis Fact Sheet, [http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au/images/stories/documents/info\\_sheets/2015/Condition%20specific/Osteoarthritis.pdf](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au/images/stories/documents/info_sheets/2015/Condition%20specific/Osteoarthritis.pdf); Better Health Channel, Osteoarthritis, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/osteoarthritis>; Exercise is medicine, Arthritis (osteoarthritis) and exercise, <http://exercisemedicine.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2014-Osteoarthritis-FULL.pdf>; Health Direct, Arthritis, <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/arthritis>; Health Direct, Osteoarthritis, <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/osteoarthritis>; Osteoporosis and Arthritis New South Wales, Osteoarthritis, <http://arthritisnsw.org.au/arthritis/information-sheets/osteoarthritis/>

## Living with osteoarthritis

**There are many things you can do to help manage osteoarthritis:**

### Learn.

Learn about osteoarthritis, play an active role in the management of it and learn about ways to manage the pain.

### Stay active.

Exercise is strongly recommended for people with osteoarthritis. It keeps joints and muscles healthy and flexible.

### Eat well.

Have a healthy diet. A diet aimed at maintaining an ideal body weight is recommended.

### Seek support.

Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. As there is currently no cure for osteoarthritis, 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.

**Disclaimer:** This information is not intended to replace medical advice from a health professional. Readers are urged to seek advice from a qualified health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions. Baptcare is a customer focused, faith centred and purpose driven organisation working across Victoria and Tasmania, providing care to the community for more than 70 years.