

Osteoarthritis (Degenerative Joint Disease)

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What Is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA), also called “wear-and-tear arthritis,” is a condition where the cushioning (cartilage) inside a joint slowly breaks down over time. This leads to changes in the bones and surrounding tissues, which can cause pain and stiffness. It most commonly affects the knees, hips, spine, and hands.

Common Symptoms

Osteoarthritis usually develops slowly. Common symptoms include:

- Aching or sore joints, especially with activity
- Stiffness in the morning or after sitting (usually improves within 30–60 minutes)
- Pain that worsens with use and improves with rest (early stages)
- Grinding, popping, or “crunching” sensation in the joint
- Swelling or enlargement around the joint
- Reduced movement or flexibility over time
- Difficulty with daily activities such as walking, climbing stairs, or gripping objects

What Causes It?

Osteoarthritis develops from a combination of factors, including:

- Normal aging and wear on the joints
- Previous joint injuries or surgeries
- Repetitive overuse of a joint, or underuse
- Joint instability or poor alignment
- Genetics (family history)
- Excess body weight placing added stress on joints

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on your symptoms and a physical examination.

X-rays are commonly used to confirm osteoarthritis and may show:

- Narrowing of joint space
- Bone spurs
- Changes in bone shape under the cartilage

Treatment Options

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but many treatments can reduce pain and improve function.

Conservative Care

- Exercise to strengthen muscles and support joints
- Stretching and mobility exercises
- Manual therapy and joint movement techniques
- Heat for stiffness and ice for flare-ups
- Weight management when appropriate
- Anti-inflammatory or pain-relief strategies
- Bracing or supportive devices in some cases
- Healthy diet and activity modification

Regular exercise is one of the most important parts of managing osteoarthritis.

Medical Treatment

When needed, treatment may include:

- Anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs)
- Pain-relieving medications
- Cortisone (steroid) injections into the joint
- Joint replacement surgery in severe cases

What Is the Outlook?

Osteoarthritis is a long-term condition that gradually changes the joints over time. However:

- Many people manage symptoms successfully for years
- Pain and stiffness can often be significantly improved
- Staying active helps protect joint function and quality of life
- The goal of treatment is to reduce pain, improve movement, and maintain independence.

Typical Treatment Schedule

Many patients are seen:

- **2–3 visits per week for 3–4 weeks**
- Progress is reassessed and treatment is adjusted as needed
- Long-term success depends on ongoing exercise, healthy movement habits, and consistent self-care.

Contact Your Healthcare Provider If You Experience:

- Sudden severe joint pain or swelling
- Inability to move or bear weight on the joint
- Rapid worsening of symptoms
- Fever with joint pain or redness