

Osteoarthritis

Facts for Older Adults
with Osteoarthritis



RAND



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Osteoarthritis

Affects many older adults

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a disease of the joints that causes the cartilage tissue covering the ends of the bones to wear away. The cartilage normally serves as a cushion, allowing bones to glide smoothly against each other as you move and bend. As it wears away, bones begin to rub together causing pain and stiffness. In severe cases, osteoarthritis can be disabling. Together, osteoarthritis and other types of arthritis are the second leading cause of disability in the United States.

Any joint may be affected, but the large weight-bearing joints of the body such as the hips and knees, the hands and the spine are the ones most commonly affected. Most disability from osteoarthritis results from involvement of the knee and hip. Affected joints become difficult to move and tend to hurt both after overuse or long periods of inactivity.



What causes osteoarthritis?

The cause of most osteoarthritis is unknown. Some factors associated with osteoarthritis, such as older age, family history, and being female, cannot be changed. Other factors such as overuse from sports or one's job can be modified. In many patients, osteoarthritis results from a major injury such as torn ligaments or fracture.



Facts About Osteoarthritis You Can Use

Exercise improves pain and disability from osteoarthritis

Strengthening and aerobic exercise programs can help support and stabilize joints, reduce pain and disability, and make walking easier for people with osteoarthritis of the knee or hip. Aerobic exercise uses large muscle groups rhythmically and continuously, and it increases your heart rate and breathing. It includes activities such as brisk walking and bicycle riding. Your strengthening and exercise program should be supervised by a health professional.



Education can improve pain and function

Arthritis education programs can teach you about what to expect from the illness, treatments available to help you, and what you can do to lessen the discomfort of osteoarthritis and make it easier to do the activities you want to do.



Medication can reduce the pain of osteoarthritis

Both over-the-counter and prescription-strength medications are commonly used to treat osteoarthritis. These medications include acetaminophen, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and newer medications called COX-2 inhibitors. All reduce the pain associated with osteoarthritis, but the side effects are not the same:

- Acetaminophen: This medication is available over-the-counter. If taken in high doses, acetaminophen can be as effective as NSAIDs and is less toxic to the stomach.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): Some of these medications are available over-the-counter and others by

prescription. Some people find these medications to be more effective than acetaminophen, but they may cause stomach ulcers or kidney damage, especially among older people.

- COX-2 inhibitors: These prescription medications are as effective as traditional NSAID medications and generally have less stomach toxicity.

Surgery may be an answer if you have severe osteoarthritis of the knee or hip

Patients who have total joint replacement for severe, disabling osteoarthritis of the knee or hip experience decreased pain, and improved function and quality of life. Joint replacement surgery is also available for other joints, but is used less commonly.



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