

Arthritis

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

The term *arthritis* refers to a variety of problems with the joints. Arthritis generally causes pain, swelling, and stiffness and can affect one or more joints of the body. It can occur at any age but affects older people most frequently.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF ARTHRITIS?

- Osteoarthritis
- Rheumatoid arthritis

WHAT IS OSTEOARTHRITIS?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis. It is also known as the “wear and tear” arthritis and is caused by a breakdown of the joint cartilage. It is a progressive degenerative joint disease, meaning it gets worse over time. It may occur at any age, but is especially common for people in their 50s and 60s. Osteoarthritis generally affects the weight-bearing joints, like the knees, hips and the joints of the spine. However, OA can also affect the fingers and the joints at the base of the thumb.



Osteoarthritis

Signs/Symptoms

- Joint pain/tenderness that gets worse over time
- Joint stiffness, especially in the morning
- Loss of movement
- *Nodes* or bony knobs around some joints
- Joint swelling
- Muscle spasms or weakness

WHAT IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a condition that causes inflammation of the lining of the joint or *synovial membrane*. It can affect people in all age groups and is more common in women. Rheumatoid arthritis often affects both sides of the body symmetrically and can eventually lead to joint damage if not controlled by medications. Rheumatoid arthritis can affect most joints in the body but usually occurs first in the small joints of the hands and feet, and only rarely in the spine.



Rheumatoid arthritis

Signs/Symptoms

- Joints that are warm, swollen, painful, or red
- Flu-like symptoms, muscle aches, fatigue, and loss of appetite
- Morning stiffness
- Deformity of joints over time

How Is Arthritis Treated?

The treatments for arthritis include both medications and physical modalities. The goals of arthritis treatment are to reduce pain and stiffness, to maintain or increase movement, and to prevent joint damage.

Physical Activity

Physical activity—such as swimming, water aerobics, walking, and biking—helps keep your range of motion and muscle strength. Set a regular time to exercise at least once or twice a day. Aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days. Slowly increase activity.

Here are some tips:

- Check with your physician/nurse practitioner before beginning any exercise program.
- Exercise on good days AND bad days.
- Decrease the number and force of exercises during periods of increased pain or swelling.
- Do not use exercise weights on sore joints.
- Balance periods of exercise with periods of rest.
- Always stretch before and after physical activity.

Moist Heat

Moist heat can relieve joint stiffness, muscle tension, and pain. It relaxes tense muscles and increases blood flow. Do not use on swollen or inflamed joints. Good sources of heat include:

- warm showers or baths
- moist towels heated in a microwave
- moist heating pad

Be careful not to burn your skin, especially if you have decreased feeling (for example, from diabetes or stroke). Do not apply heat for more than 15-20 minutes at a time.

Cold

Cold is best for red, hot, or swollen joints. It helps decrease swelling and pain. It relaxes tense muscles and has a numbing effect. Good sources of cold include:

- a bag of frozen peas
- an ice pack or plastic bag filled with ice and wrapped in a thin dish cloth

Be careful of freezing your skin, especially if you have decreased feeling (for example, from diabetes or stroke). Do not apply ice for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

Joint Protection

Protecting the joints means decreasing the wear and tear on a joint. Decreasing wear and tear will help protect the joint from more harm and deformity. Follow these suggestions to protect your joints:

- Avoid long periods in the same position.
- Decrease stress on joints by keeping good posture and maintaining a healthy body weight.

- Keep joints properly lined up (alignment).
- Rest or shift your body weight from the joint when very painful.
- Avoid overuse during flare-ups.
- Change activities to decrease joint stress.
- Avoid using braces or other mechanical devices that limit joint movement unless advised by a health care professional.

Medications

Medications may be given to decrease pain and inflammation. The medications prescribed depends on the type of arthritis it is being used to treat. Medications should be taken **ONLY** after consulting your physician/nurse practitioner.

Supplements

There have been scientific studies showing that the supplements glucosamine and chondroitin can be helpful in decreasing pain and increasing function for OA of the knee. There is some encouraging evidence that they will also help in OA of the hip. We do not yet know if these supplements can help other joints. Talk to your pharmacist, physician, or nurse practitioner to be sure they are right for you. Other supplements claim that they can help relieve the pain associated with arthritis, however, these claims often do not have any scientific proof. Supplements are sold over-the-counter and vary widely in quality and purity. At Kaiser Permanente we have reviewed potential effectiveness of selected products and are working with manufacturers to offer high quality supplements.

When to Call Kaiser Permanente

- If you have a fever or skin rash along with severe joint pain.
- If the joint is so painful that you cannot use it.
- If there is sudden, unexplained swelling, redness, heat or pain in any joint.
- If there is severe pain and swelling in multiple joints.
- If you experience sudden back pain that occurs with weakness in the legs or loss of bowel or bladder control.
- If joint pain continues for more than six weeks and home treatment is not helping.
- If you experience side effects from aspirin or other arthritis medications (stomach pain, nausea, persistent heartburn or dark tarry stools).

Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions.

If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.