



Arthritis

- Arthritis is a general term that refers to over 150 different conditions that affect the muscles, bones and joints
- Knowing the type of arthritis you have means that you can make informed decisions about your healthcare
- You can live well with arthritis by working closely with your healthcare team and by making positive lifestyle changes

Arthritis is a general term that refers to over 150 different conditions. The accurate term for this group of conditions is musculoskeletal conditions, as they affect the muscles, bones and/or joints.

Some common conditions are osteoarthritis, back pain, rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, gout, polymyalgia rheumatica, lupus and ankylosing spondylitis.

Anyone can get arthritis, including children and young people. It can affect people from all backgrounds, ages and lifestyles.

Your musculoskeletal system

To understand how arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions work, it's helpful to know a little about the muscles, bones and joints that make up your musculoskeletal system.

Joints are places where bones meet. Bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons all work together so that you can bend, twist, stretch and move about.

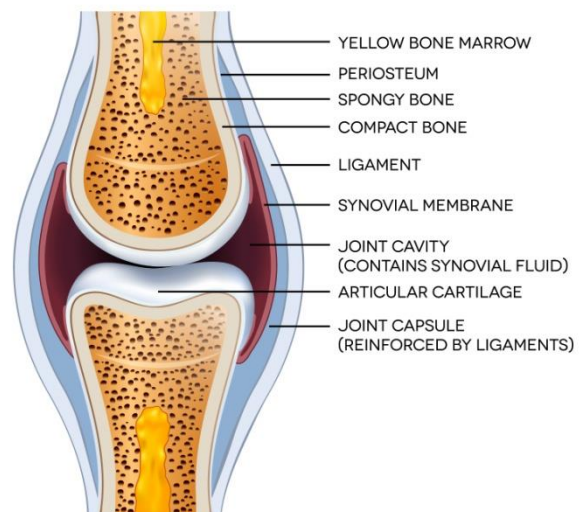
The ends of your bones are covered in a thin layer of a smooth tissue called cartilage. It acts like a slippery cushion that helps your joint move smoothly.

Around most of your joints is a joint capsule. This keeps your bones in place. Inside the capsule is a thick fluid which nourishes and lubricates your joint (like oil for a squeaky hinge).

Ligaments hold the joint together by joining one bone to another. Your muscles are attached to the bones by tendons. As your muscles contract, they pull on the bones to make the joint move.

Arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions affect the normal functioning of your joints, muscles, bones and surrounding structures. The way this happens will depend on the condition you have.

NORMAL JOINT



Symptoms

Arthritis affects people in different ways and each condition will have specific symptoms, however common symptoms are:

- pain
- swelling, redness and warmth in a joint
- muscular aches and pains
- stiffness or reduced movement of a joint
- general symptoms such as fatigue and feeling unwell.

Sometimes, these symptoms are called 'rheumatism'. Rheumatism isn't a disorder in itself, but the word is occasionally used to describe any sort of joint or muscle pain.

Diagnosis

If you think you have a type of arthritis, and have been experiencing joint or muscle pain, it's important that you discuss your symptoms with your doctor. Getting a diagnosis as soon as possible means that treatment can start quickly. Early treatment will give you the best possible outcomes.

Having a correct diagnosis will mean you get the most appropriate care, as treatment, especially medication, can differ a lot depending on the type of arthritis you have.

Because there are so many types of arthritis, your doctor may do a number of exams and tests to diagnose which condition you have. This may include:

- medical history – finding out about your symptoms, your family history, other health problems you've experienced in the past
- physical examination – your doctor will look for redness and swelling in and around the joint, and will check out the range of movement of your joints. Depending on the type of arthritis your doctor thinks you may have, they may also look for rashes, check your eyes and throat, measure your temperature
- scans and other tests—again depending on the type of arthritis your doctor thinks you have, you may have blood tests to check for levels of inflammation in your blood or specific genetic markers. You may also have scans such as x-rays, ultrasound, CT or MRI to get a clearer picture of what's happening inside your joints
- referral to a specialist - if appropriate your doctor will refer you to a specialist, often a rheumatologist, for diagnosis and specialised management of your condition.

Treatment

Living with arthritis can be different from person to person, and symptoms can vary from day to day. Treatment and management options will vary depending on the type of arthritis you have, its severity and the parts of the body affected.

There is no cure for arthritis. Management options can include medical treatment and medication, physiotherapy, exercise and self-management techniques.

Your arthritis healthcare team

A range of health professionals are able to help you manage your arthritis. These may include:

- your general practitioner (GP)
- rheumatologist
- physiotherapist
- dietitian
- occupational therapist
- exercise physiologist
- podiatrist
- pharmacist
- nurse
- psychologist.

Medication for arthritis

Different types of arthritis are treated with different medications.

Some arthritis medications aim to reduce pain and inflammation. Others work on the disease process itself and aim to slow down, or stop damage to the joints.

The medications your doctor prescribes will depend on your type of arthritis and the severity of your symptoms.

You should let your doctor know about any other medications or treatments you're taking - even if you've purchased them from a supermarket, health store or complementary therapist (e.g. naturopath, homeopath). They may affect how well your arthritis medications work, or may interact with them and cause unpleasant side effects.

The most common types of medications used to treat arthritis include:

- pain relievers (or analgesics) – for temporary pain relief
- creams and ointments – can be rubbed into the skin over a painful joint to provide temporary pain relief
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) – to control inflammation and provide pain relief
- corticosteroids – to quickly control or reduce inflammation
- disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) – control your overactive immune system
- biologics and biosimilars (bDMARDs) – are biological disease-modifying drugs that work to control your immune system, but in a much more targeted way.

Self-management

There are many things you can do to manage your arthritis including:

Learn about your condition – what type of arthritis or musculoskeletal condition do you have? What are the treatment options? What can you expect in the future? Knowing as much as possible about your condition means that you can make informed decisions about your healthcare and play an active role in the management of your condition.

Stay active - physical activity is the key to maintaining muscle strength, joint flexibility, bone health and managing your pain. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can help design an individual program for you. This can be arranged by your doctor on a GP Management Plan as part of managing chronic illness.

Learn ways to manage pain - there are many strategies you can use to deal with pain. Knowing about these different strategies and what works best for you is an important part of living with a chronic condition such as arthritis.

Watch your diet - while there's no diet that can cure arthritis, a healthy and well-balanced diet is the best for general good health. Keeping to a healthy weight is also important as any extra weight puts added strain on your joints, especially load bearing joints such as your hips, knee and ankles.

Work closely with your healthcare team - the best way to live well with arthritis is by working closely with all the practitioners who make up your healthcare team. Keep them informed about how you're going, and if you've experienced any changes in your symptoms or you've been trying new medications, complementary therapies, supplements or other treatments.

Protect your joints - find out about aids, equipment and gadgets that can make tasks easier. An occupational therapist can give you advice on aids, equipment and home modifications. The Independent Living Centre can also be a very useful contact for information and advice.

Stay at work or at school – they're both good for your health and wellbeing. Talk to your doctor or allied healthcare professional about ways to help you stay at work or school or get back to work or school.

Join a peer support group – dealing with a chronic condition can be isolating. Being able to speak with others who understand your condition can be a great relief.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Medicines Line
- Independent Living Centre
- Musculoskeletal Australia
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Australian Physiotherapy Association www.physiotherapy.asn.au
- Exercise and Sports Science Australia www.essa.org.au
- Independent Living Centre <http://ilcaustralia.org.au>
- Medicines Line www.nps.org.au 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
- Arthritis Research UK www.arthritisresearchuk.org
- Arthritis Foundation (USA) www.arthritis.org
- Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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