

Patient information from BMJ

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Osteoarthritis: what is it?

Osteoarthritis can make your joints stiff and painful. This can make it hard to do everyday things, such as getting up out of a chair or tying a shoelace, and sometimes even walking.

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but there are treatments that can help relieve the symptoms and help you move more easily.

What happens in osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a condition that affects joints. It's most common in the joints of the knees, hips, hands, and spine.

Osteoarthritis happens when the cartilage at the ends of bones becomes damaged. **Cartilage** is a hard, slippery material that coats the end of a bone where it meets another bone. It allows bones to move smoothly against each other without rubbing together.

When cartilage is damaged, the bone in your joints tries to repair the damage (bone can grow and mend itself).

But instead of making things better, in osteoarthritis the bone grows abnormally and makes things worse. For example, the bone can grow into a knobby shape and make the joint painful and unstable.

No one really understands why bone does this. And it's not clear if the cartilage damage happens before or after the bone grows abnormally.

Although osteoarthritis is not caused simply by ageing or by wear and tear of the cartilage at the end of the bones, it is more common in older people. Other things that make you more likely to get osteoarthritis include:

- being overweight
- being a woman
- having osteoarthritis in your family.

Osteoarthritis: what is it?

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of osteoarthritis usually develop slowly, sometimes over many years. The most common ones are:

- pain. This may be constant or it might happen only when you use a particular joint. It can be burning, aching, or sharp
- stiffness. This is usually at its worst first thing in the morning
- problems moving: for example, you may find it hard to climb stairs or reach a high shelf
- swollen joints
- a crunching feeling in your joints when you move them
- knobbly joints
- muscle weakness around an affected joint.

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and look at your joints. He or she may also order some tests, such as an **x-ray** and **blood test**, to check whether your symptoms are caused by osteoarthritis or whether something else might be causing them.

What will happen to me?

Osteoarthritis is a condition that usually, but not always, progresses very slowly, often over many years.

The pain and stiffness may even get better with time, especially with treatment. But it's hard to predict what will happen to you as an individual.

Research suggests that you may be able to avoid developing severe symptoms by keeping your weight at a healthy level and staying mobile.

For more information on treatments for osteoarthritis see our leaflet *Osteoarthritis: what treatments work?*

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