

all about arthritis

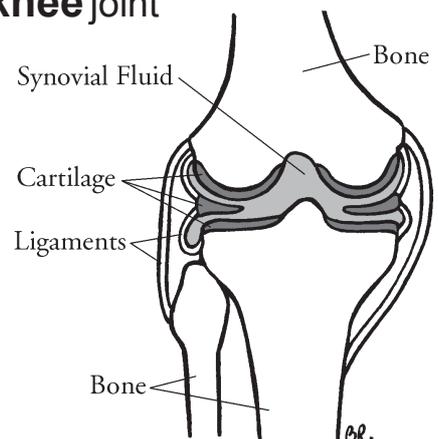
You will develop arthritis at some point in your lifetime. It can be very mild, causing a little stiffness as you age, or it can be extremely painful and debilitating. Fortunately, there are things you can do to prevent and manage this condition.

Arthritis is not actually a disease. Arthritis is a term used to describe joint inflammation ("arthro" = joint; "itis" = inflammation). When inflammation is present, the joint is usually painful. However, not all joint pain is arthritis. Problems like trigger points, sprains, or tendinitis can cause pain, but the joint itself remains healthy.

To help you understand arthritis, it's useful to know a little bit about joints. Joints are like hinges
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“Almost every one over 60 years of age will have enough arthritis present to be detected in x-rays”

knee joint



what kind is it?

Osteoarthritis

Doctors will often refer to this type of arthritis as degenerative joint disease, or if it affects the back, degenerative disc disease. It sounds scary, but it's the most common and least serious type of arthritis. Osteoarthritis is simply wear and tear of the cartilage on the ends of the bones. One research study found that 37% of all adults have osteoarthritis in their hands or feet. Everyone over sixty-five years of age has it to some degree. However, because the cartilage is not sensitive to pain, you most often do not know you have it.

Stiffness is a key feature of osteoarthritis. Typically, your joints feel stiff in the morning and will loosen up after you move around for awhile. Sometimes the joints will make crackling or crunching sounds with movement. In the early stages, you will only feel pain after excessive activity. The pain is usually an aching sensation within the joint. You will seldom see swelling because inflammation in the joint tends to be minimal.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is not nearly as common as osteoarthritis. It occurs in only about 1% of adults.

This type of arthritis is called systemic arthritis because it can affect many of your body systems. For example, it can affect your heart, lungs, nerves and skin. Whereas osteoarthritis usually develops as you get older, rheumatoid arthritis can occur at any age.

Usually the symptoms appear over a period of weeks or months and are accompanied by fatigue, fever, and diffuse pain. Subsequently, specific joints become inflamed and are painful, tender, swollen and red. Many joints become involved and both sides of your body are affected equally. There are periods when it goes into remission. It's progressive however and overtime the involved joints often become somewhat deformed.

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between bones. The surfaces where the bones connect are covered with cartilage; you would recognize this as gristle on a chicken leg. Cartilage is a smooth material that acts as a shock absorber and allows the bones to glide smoothly over one another. Ligaments (fibrous structures that attach one bone to another bone) surround the joint to form a sleeve that encapsulates the joint. Inside that sleeve is a slippery fluid called synovial fluid. This fluid lubricates the cartilage much like oil lubricates the parts of an engine.

There are virtually dozens of problems or pathologies that are considered arthritis. Two of the most common are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis (see page 1).

Other types of arthritis like lupus, ankylosing spondylitis, psoriatic arthritis and Reiter's syndrome are less common. These are all systemic conditions. What differentiates each of these is the specific joints that become affected, the problems that occur in other body systems, and the severity of the symptoms.

help is available

Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis and other types of systemic arthritis most often involves the use of medications in conjunction with massage, joint mobilization and exercise. By following this type of regimen, a person can usually minimize their pain and discomfort significantly.

You will eventually develop osteoarthritis at some point. If it starts to give you problems, it can usually be managed very well without medication. It is vitally important, however, that you take proactive measures to prevent wear and tear on your joints. You must manage your tension and maintain good posture to prevent excessive or uneven pressure on your joints. You can do this by practicing relaxation exercises, stretching and by having regular massage. If you want to learn how to improve your posture ask your massage therapist to do a postural assessment and to suggest some simple exercises to help correct imbalances. Many therapists are also trained in fascial or deep tissue techniques that will allow them to manually stretch out shortened muscles that are pulling your body out of alignment.

Do you have to stop exercising because your cartilage is wearing thin? Far from it. You need to move your joints to get nutrients to your cartilage so it can heal. Inactivity can actually cause your

cartilage to deteriorate faster. If you have a sedentary job, make sure that you take frequent breaks. As well, engage in some low impact activities like walking, swimming, biking or any activity that you enjoy doing on a regular basis. If you need help starting a program ask your therapist for assistance.

In the case of osteoarthritis, you should consider surgery only after conservative treatment has failed and pain and limitation in movement interferes with your day-to-day activities in a significant way.

With arthritic conditions, some joints will lose their mobility, while other joints will tend to become hypermobile. Your muscles have to work harder to both compensate for lost movement and to stabilize loose joints. Remember that cartilage doesn't feel pain. The pain associated with arthritis usually comes from overworked muscles or sometimes from the capsule that surrounds the joint. For this reason, massage therapy can be invaluable in managing your symptoms: general massage to reduce muscle spasm, trigger point therapy to reduce referred pain, and when necessary, joint mobilization to stretch tightened joints and restore your mobility.

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