

Patient information from BMJ

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Osteoarthritis: what is it?

Osteoarthritis is a condition that causes stiff and painful joints. This can make it hard to do everyday activities for some people.

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but there are treatments that can help relieve the symptoms.

What happens in osteoarthritis?

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

Osteoarthritis happens when the cartilage at the ends of bones becomes damaged or is worn down. **Cartilage** is a hard, slippery material that coats the end of a bone and protects it.

When cartilage breaks down, the bone tries to repair it. This can lead to bony growths that make the joint painful and unstable.

Although osteoarthritis is not caused simply by aging or by wear and tear of the cartilage, it is more common in older people. The exact cause of the condition is not known. But other things that make you more likely to get osteoarthritis include:

- Being overweight
- Being a woman
- Injury to a joint
- Having osteoarthritis in your family.

What are the symptoms?

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

- Pain. This is usually worse with activity because you are using the joint. It can be burning, aching, or sharp
- Stiffness. This is usually worse first thing in the morning

Osteoarthritis: what is it?

- Problems moving: for example, you might find it hard to climb stairs or reach a high shelf
- Swollen joints
- A crunching feeling or sound in your joints when you move them
- Knobbly joints
- Muscle weakness around the affected joint.

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and look at your joints. They might also order some tests such as an **x-ray** and **blood test**, to check your symptoms are not caused by another condition.

What will happen to me?

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

There is no cure for it but pain and stiffness might get better with time, especially with treatment. It's hard to predict what will happen to you as an individual.

Research suggests that you might 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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