

Understanding Arthritis

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a general term that refers to joint pain or joint disease. There are more than 100 types of arthritis and related health conditions.

What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Common symptoms include joint pain and swelling, stiffness, and decreased range of motion. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and may come and go. Severe arthritis can lead to chronic pain, decreased ability to perform daily activities, and may limit the ability to walk or climb stairs. Arthritis can cause permanent joint damage that is sometimes manifested as knobby finger joints. Oftentimes, the damage is only visible on x-ray.



Common types of arthritis:

- **Osteoarthritis (OA)**
 - This type of arthritis affects more than 32.5 million adults and is considered the most common type of arthritis in the United States according to the CDC. Osteoarthritis is often thought of as “wear and tear” associated with aging. OA typically affects hands, knees, hips, lower back, and neck. Symptoms usually start after age 50, but can impact younger people, especially those who have had a previous injury to the joint.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)**
 - Rheumatoid arthritis happens when the immune system wrongly attacks joints resulting in pain and inflammation. RA can also impact internal organs. Early diagnosis and treatment can help to slow the progression of joint damage.
- **Gout**
 - Gout is characterized by sudden, severe attacks of pain, swelling, redness and tenderness in one or more joints, most often in the big toe. The symptoms often come and go. Gout is the result of an accumulation of urate crystals in the joint which causes inflammation and intense pain.
- **Fibromyalgia**
 - Fibromyalgia involves widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, sleep, memory, and mood issues. It is believed that the brain and spinal cord of those affected by fibromyalgia process pain signals differently, which amplifies the body’s response. Symptoms often follow an event such as physical trauma, surgery, infection, or significant psychological stress.
- **Lupus**
 - Lupus is an autoimmune disease that can cause inflammation in joints, skin, kidneys, blood cells, brain, heart, and lungs. A facial rash resembling the wings of a butterfly occurs in many but not all cases of lupus.

- **Psoriatic arthritis (PsA)**

- Psoriatic arthritis is an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system errantly attacks healthy joints and skin. Like other forms of arthritis, this results in joint pain, stiffness and swelling (especially in fingers and toes), skin rashes, nail changes, decreased range of motion, and eye problems.

How is arthritis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will obtain a detailed health history including symptoms, general health, and family history. A thorough physical exam may reveal joint tenderness and inflammation that may be indicative of arthritis. Additional testing may be ordered, including X-rays and sometimes MRI. Your healthcare provider may also order blood tests, skin or muscle biopsies, and sometimes nerve tests to further aid in diagnosing different types of arthritis.

How is arthritis treated?

Treatment can vary depending on the type and severity of your arthritis. A healthy diet and routine exercise can play an important role in controlling the severity of your arthritis symptoms. Learning to manage stress and to get adequate sleep are also important factors in arthritis treatment.

Your healthcare provider may suggest over-the-counter medications to treat pain and inflammation. For more severe cases, prescription medications may be needed. Steroid medications can help to reduce inflammation and pain and slow joint damage. Other medications known as DMARDS (disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs) may be used to help slow the progression of rheumatoid arthritis. A newer class of DMARDs known as biologics, or biologic response modifiers, may be used in combination with conventional DMARDs.

Physical and/or occupational therapy may be recommended to teach you exercises to help maintain flexibility and to teach new methods of performing daily tasks that will be less stressful to your joints.

Additional resources:

[Arthritis@Work](#)

<https://www.mayoclinic.org>

<https://www.arthritis.org/>