About Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint disease that affects cartilage. Cartilage is the cushion in joints that protects them from pressure and makes movements smooth. When cartilage breaks down, bones rub together causing pain, swelling and loss of motion of the joint. In severe cases, joints may lose their normal shape or bone spurs can develop on the edge of a joint.

Risk

There are 27 million adults in the United State with osteoarthritis. Before age 45, more men are at risk than women. After age 45, the condition is more common in women. Risk for osteoarthritis increases with:

- Age
- Overweight, or weight bearing on the hips, knees and spine
- Diabetes
- Genetic risk factors
- Injury or overuse of a joint, such as repetitive motion
- Muscle weakness
- Problems with physical skeletal or joint structure, such as mismatch on joint surface or legs of unequal length can increase risk for hip or knee issues

Signs of Osteoarthritis

Signs of the disease often develop over time and can include:

- Pain or sore joints, and joint swelling
- Stiffness in the morning or after sitting for long periods

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Learn more about your health care.
Testing
After a physical exam, tests may be used to check your health. These may include x-rays and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Joint fluid analysis may be used to rule out rheumatoid arthritis.

Treatment
Treatment depends on your age, activities, job, health, medical history, location of the disease and its severity. Orthopedist doctors help with osteoarthritis. Doctors may help you with:

- Medicines: Medicines are used to control pain, or help with bone or joint health.
- Rest: Rest is used to reduce pain from overexertion.
- Pain control: Different methods can be used, including warm towels or baths, heat or cold packs, massage, or water therapy for stiffness and pain.
- Medical equipment: Splits or braces can be used to provide support for weak joints to keep them in alignment. Limit time for split or brace use as your joints and muscles need exercise to prevent stiffness and weakness.
- Weight control: A dietitian can help you to focus on healthy eating.
- Supplements: Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate and certain vitamins have been shown in clinical research to improve signs of osteoarthritis.
- Alternative therapy: Some patients find pain relief with acupuncture, massage, copper bracelets and herbal teas.
- Surgery: This may be needed to: replace the joint, smooth out bones/joints, reposition bones/joints, or remove loose pieces of bone or cartilage from the joint. Artificial joints can last 10 to 20 years. You and your doctor will decide if joint replacement surgery is best for your health.

Physical and occupational therapists may be part of your treatment team. They will help you with strength and stability, such as:

- Endurance and resistance exercises to improve movement. This takes into account how stable the joints are, and assist if joint replacement is needed.
- Therapy to control pain and swelling, including water therapy or heat/cold or positioning, such as avoid positions that put stress on joints.
- Home safety equipment or assistive devices, such as grab bars in the shower or bathtub for balance and to avoid the risk of falls.