

This is an inflammation of the joints and its causes are varied. There are two main types of arthritis - rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

What to look for

- **Osteoarthritis** - Stiffness and pain when the joint is moved after time the pain becomes continuous. The joints which bear the weight are the worst affected - hips, knees, lower back, big toes. (Being overweight can make the condition worse).
- **Rheumatoid Arthritis** - Painful swelling, inflammation, and stiffness in the arms, legs, wrists, or fingers in the same joints on both sides of the body, especially on awakening.
- Fever, joint inflammation, tenderness, and sharp pain, chills, could be associated with an injury, illness.
- **In children**, intermittent fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, anaemia, or blotchy rash on the arms and legs may signal juvenile rheumatoid arthritis.

Osteoarthritis happens when the cartilage in a joint ceases to act as a shock absorber and becomes eroded by the movement of the joint. There is a systematic loss of bone tissue in the joint. It tends to come on slowly over time and may not be noticeable in some people, although an accident or fracture can also cause it. More common in people over 45. It is the most common form of arthritis.

Rheumatoid arthritis is slightly more serious... It gradually becomes worse over time. The inflammation of the joints can eventually become deformed or be destroyed. It can strike anybody between the ages of 25 and 55.

CAUSES

Although the mechanism of osteoarthritis is unknown, some people appear to have a genetic predisposition to degenerative bone disorders. In rare cases, congenital bone deformation appears at an early age. Misuse of anabolic steroids can also bring on early osteoarthritic degeneration.

Each of the two major types of arthritic conditions has its own apparent causes...

- **Rheumatoid arthritis...** The cause of rheumatoid arthritis is not fully understood. Some researchers think it may be some sort of auto-immune disorder. Another theory suggests that it is an immune reaction to a viral infection somewhere in the body or hereditary.
- **Osteoarthritis...** This common degenerative joint disease is part of the aging process. The condition may be associated with broken bones and can develop in young adults from wear and tear on the body's load-bearing joints, often as a result of athletic activity. In cases of osteoarthritis, the cartilage and bone cannot repair themselves sufficiently to keep up with the damage.

Traditional Treatment

If you think you may have some form of arthritis, do not 'just put up with it'. Your doctor can give you a series of tests including a blood test which can detect the presence of the infection.

Sometimes arthritic damage can be slowed or stopped, but in most cases the damage continues as the disease runs its course, regardless of whether drugs or other therapies are used to relieve the symptoms. The duration and intensity of the actual pain and discomfort depend on the type of arthritis how severe the condition is. The recovery can take a short time for otherwise healthy people or may take years for older patients.

For localised pain, stiffness, and immobility, medication is used to relieve pain and inflammation, rest should be taken to let injured tissues heal themselves, and exercise to rebuild mobility and strength.

To reduce pain and inflammation in mild cases of rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, your Pharmacist and/or doctor will probably prescribe a over the counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Physicians may combine these drugs with regimens of heat, rest and exercise, physical therapy, and physical aids such as canes or walkers. Controlled application of deep heat and ultrasound can also soothe affected joints. Your Pharmacist will be able to assist you with these.

In more advanced cases, your Doctor may recommend corticosteroid injections to ease the pain and stiffness of affected joints.

In cases of arthritic complications from injury or infection, specific therapy will depend on the nature and seriousness of the underlying condition. The major concern is for healing the affected area before more serious complications occur. Treatment of infectious arthritis typically involves large intravenous doses of antibiotics as well as drainage of excess fluid from the joints.

Various forms of surgery may be needed to reduce the discomfort of arthritis or to restore mobility. Synovectomy is the removal of damaged connective tissue lining a joint cavity, and allows the body to regenerate new, healthy tissue in its place. This operation is most common in the knee.

In cases of severe arthritic damage to the neck or foot, bones can be surgically removed or fused. Although movement is limited after such surgery, the operations relieve excruciating pain and help prevent further damage to nerves or blood vessels.

If arthritic pain and inflammation become truly unbearable, or arthritic joints simply refuse to function, the answer may lie in surgical replacement. Today, hip and shoulder joints as well as smaller joints in elbows, knees, and fingers can be replaced with reliable artificial joints made of stainless steel and plastic.

Because one of the hardest parts of arthritis is being able to cope with the pain, many doctors recommend training in pain management, including cognitive therapy.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

Many people use natural therapies in a bid to ease arthritic pain as traditional treatments have not helped substantially. Arthritis sufferers should be extremely cautious, however, about practices that claim to "cure" the disease. Furthermore, what appears to work for one person under a given set of circumstances may not work at all for someone else.

- **Body Work** - In combination with other treatments, massage around affected joints or compassionate touching by a doctor or other practitioner may have a comforting effect on those who suffer from arthritis.
- **Herbal Therapies** - try guaiacum, dandelion root, comfrey, black cohosh, burdock, fennel seed, meadowsweet or corn silk in teas, tablets or other herbal mixtures. A great juice for this condition is celery juice made fresh.
- **Homoeopathy** - For chronic osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, remedies will be prescribed after consultation.
- **Yoga** - may help relax the mind and body.

Personal Care

A balanced program of rest and gentle exercise is highly recommended for both forms of arthritis, with swimming being the best as it takes the weight off the affected areas.

Warmth (from hot water bottles or heat lamps or a warm bath) can help relieve the pain and cold packs or compresses of water can be good for serious attacks.

Regular exercise is important to keep the joints mobile. People with weakened, badly deformed fingers from rheumatoid arthritis benefit from specially designed utensils and door and drawer handles; people suffering weakness in the legs and arms from osteoarthritis can use special bathroom fixtures, especially tub rails and elevated toilet seats. Once again ask your Pharmacist about these.

Dietary Considerations

Avoiding specific foods may stop arthritic symptoms, especially... grains, nuts, meats, eggs, and dairy products, alcohol, tea and coffee.

Avoid plants in the nightshade family... tomato, potato, eggplant, and capsicum.

Eat more fish (especially tuna and salmon) avocado, fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, brown rice and plenty of filtered water. Generally low-fat, low-protein vegetarian diets may ease the pain and inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis.

Vitamin therapy may relieve certain arthritic symptoms...

- Beta carotene (vitamin A) has an antioxidant effect on cells, neutralising destructive molecules called free radicals.
- Vitamins C, B6, B3 and E, as well as Zinc. Vitamin C may also be advised for people taking aspirin, which depletes the body's vitamin C balance.
- Niacin (vitamin B3) may also be helpful, although excessive use may aggravate liver problems.

Always take vitamin supplements under professional guidance, since overdoses of some vitamin compounds can have side effects or undesirable interactions with drugs.

Some therapists recommend cherries or dark red berries to stimulate the production of collagen, essential to cartilage repair.

When to seek further professional advice

- the pain and stiffness come on quickly, whether from an injury or an unknown cause;
- the pain is accompanied by fever;
- you notice pain and stiffness in your arms, legs, or back after sitting for short periods or after a night's sleep;
- a child develops pain or a rash on armpits, knees, wrists, and ankles, or has fever swings, poor appetite, and weight loss.