

# Living with osteoarthritis

Department of Rheumatology

Information for Patients

Last reviewed: September 2025

Next review: September 2028

Leaflet number: 1151 Version: 2

## Introduction

Osteoarthritis is common joint problem. It happens when the joint wears down and tries to repair itself. The joint surface (cartilage) becomes worn or damaged. Other parts of the joint like bone, ligaments and joint lining, change as the body tries to fix the damage.

## Treatment

There is no known cure but there are many ways to help with pain and stiffness.

**Exercise:** Moving your body helps joints work better and makes muscles stronger. General physical activity that raises the heart and breathing rate is called aerobic exercise. This type of exercise burns off calories, helps improve sleep and may reduce pain. There is good evidence that exercise does not harm arthritic joints.

**Weight:** being overweight can affect the joints in 2 main ways:

- Extra weight on the joints can cause pain and discomfort.
- Hormones produced in fat can affect joint tissues and increase sensitivity to pain.

Losing weight can help joints work better, lower pain and lower the risk of getting other health problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

**Well-being:** pain is a warning sign. It is normal to want to protect the affected area. But long-term rest, less activity and using supports like knee support, bandage, splint for a long time can make things worse. Sometimes people stop doing things they enjoy because they are afraid of the pain.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## Ways to manage long-term pain

After time, less activity leads to muscles becoming weaker, joints stiffer and nerves to those areas become more sensitive. We are also less fit and tire more easily. It is more likely for strains and sprains to occur, causing more pain. This can become a vicious circle. It can lead to frustration, worry and low moods.

Ways to manage long term pain:

- Keep in touch with friends and family.
- stay as active as you can.
- set some goals and pace yourself.
- relaxation techniques may lower your pain and encourage a sense of well-being.
- try 'mindfulness' exercises.

**Complementary and alternative remedies:** Some complementary medicines and nutritional supplements may help with pain and stiffness. There is some proof they work, but we don't know everything yet like which ones to take, for how long and for what type of osteoarthritis. Popular supplements include

- glucosamine sulphate
- chondroitin
- organic sulphur (methylsulfonylmethane (MSM))
- turmeric
- Indian frankincense (boswellia serrata)
- avocado-soybean extracts (ASU)

**Footwear, insoles and splints:** ankles, midfoot or toes. For example with shoes, you may need a different size or width fitting.

Some people need insoles to correct foot shape. A chiropodist or podiatrist could give advice.

Splints can help support hand joints, such as the wrist and base of thumb.

**Oral medicine:** you can take 1 to 2 paracetamol tablets, 2 to 3 times a day for simple pain relief. You can talk to your doctor about more pain relief medications if needed.

**Creams:** ibuprofen gel, diclofenac (Voltarol gel), capsaicin cream or Flexiseq cream can help with joint pain when used on the skin.



## More information

### Versus Arthritis:

<https://versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/osteoarthritis/>

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/1337/complementary-and-alternative-medicines-report.pdf>

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/complementary-and-alternative-treatments/>

### British Society for Rheumatology:

<https://academic.oup.com/rheumatology/article/50/5/911/1772653>

[https://academic.oup.com/rheumatology/issue/57/suppl\\_4](https://academic.oup.com/rheumatology/issue/57/suppl_4)

## Contact details

Please contact your GP if you any questions and concerns or call NHS helpline on **111**.

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