

Osteoarthritis of the Knee

What is it?

Osteoarthritis is a commonly occurring condition associated with the aging process. In the knee, the joint surfaces of the thigh bone, shin bone and kneecap may start to wear. The smooth cartilage surfaces become roughened, becoming thin and the bone underneath thickens. There is also inflammation of the surrounding tissues. This can cause swelling in the joint which can cause the joint to stiffen and the muscles around it can become weaker. The level of arthritic wear does not always relate to the level of pain you can have.



There is no one cause of osteoarthritis but there are a number of **risk factors** that can contribute;

Age: It is more common over the age of 40. However it may not actually be solely caused by getting older: It may be due to other factors like weakening muscles, a decrease in physical activity and slower healing times from injury as we age.

Gender: it is more common in women than men

Obesity: Being over-weight may be associated with osteoarthritis for two reasons: The joints are not designed to cope with extra load and extra fatty tissue in the body may cause more general inflammation.

Injury; previous injury, especially fracture increases the risk

Genetic factors: You inherit the risk of being born with a misshapen hip if it's in the family

What can I do to help myself?

Exercise: Making the muscles stronger around the hip will help to take the load off the joint which will help your pain. Low impact exercises like swimming, cycling or walking will help to keep your general fitness and avoid weight gain. Stretching will help prevent the soft tissues tightening up. Activities like Tai Chi and yoga can be helpful. Some simple exercises which may help can be [found here](#) and some local exercise support information can be [found here](#).

Weight management: Being over-weight increases the load on the joint and is more likely to worsen your arthritis in the long term. Extra fatty tissue increases your inflammation in all your joints. It is more difficult to lose weight when you are in pain so the focus should be on a calorie controlled diet and very light exercises. Local weight loss support can be [found here](#).

Reducing joint stress:reducing stress on the affected joint may be helpful in relieving symptoms. Strategies may include for example pacing activities to slowly build up your exercise tolerance, using a walking stick or wearing appropriate footwear.

Tablets and creams: taking a pain killer to help you manage your pain can be very helpful, especially if it allows you to do your exercises and continue with daily activities. Your pharmacist can help you with non-prescription medication and creams. For stronger medication you should see your GP. Currently there is no strong evidence that supplements are helpful but a good balanced diet, light moderate exercise and avoiding smoking is encouraged.

Be positive. Osteoarthritis is not necessarily a condition that will get worse, it can often stay the same and may even get better.

When should I see my Doctor?

If you have pain and stiffness in your knee, without any cause this may simply be a strain rather than osteoarthritis. Often this will settle within a few weeks so the general advice is to reduce activity for a few days to allow your symptoms to settle and then slowly increase to your previous level of activity. If your symptoms have not settled within around 6 weeks, and are perhaps getting worse and disturbing your sleep, then see your GP.

If your symptoms persist then usually a course of physiotherapy will be advised. Your GP may refer you for an x ray, although it is not always necessary to have this done. Other symptoms which warrant medical review including recurrent giving way of your knee, clunking or locking. If your knee becomes hot, swollen and red this requires urgent medical opinion to rule out any infection.

If you have had physiotherapy in the past that has not been helpful or your pain is severe you may be referred to see a specialist. They may discuss other options including [injection](#) or surgery.

'Option Grids' can be a useful tool in exploring different options which may be appropriate in the management of an osteoarthritis knee. These tools are designed to help patients and [health professionals](#) talk about these:

Further information

The following resources may be useful for additional information:

Arthritis Research Origination General Info Leaflet:

<http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/shop/products/publications/patient-information/conditions/osteoarthritis.aspx>

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/osteoarthritis/pages/introduction.aspx>

Understanding Pain in less than 5 minutes, and what to do about it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3phB93rvI

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/loseweight/Pages/Loseweighthome.aspx>

<http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/shop/products/publications/patient-information/surgery/knee-replacement-surgery.aspx>