

Osteoarthritis

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Wear and tear of your joints may occur due to aging, injury, prolonged poor posture, overuse of joints, or excess weight.

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Symptoms

The early symptoms of osteoarthritis are recurring pain and stiffness in the joints. These symptoms are especially noticeable first thing in the morning or after sitting in one place for lengthy periods of time. Other symptoms may include swelling, obvious redness or a feeling of heat, and inability to move a joint. As the disease progresses, the damage to the joint increases.

Osteoarthritis affects people in varying degrees. Despite permanent changes to the joint, some people may be pain-free, or suffer only mild or occasional pain provoked by episodes of increased use or minor trauma. For other people, symptoms can be disabling and, when the larger joints of the body are involved such as the hip or knee, the severity of the problem may require surgical treatment. The most commonly affected areas include knees, hips, hands, neck and back.

Rest, balanced with exercise and activity, is an important part of managing your osteoarthritis. Rest is especially important when joints are hot, swollen or painful.



Physiotherapy Can Help

Physiotherapists are health professionals skilled in the assessment and treatment of the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Your individualized physiotherapy treatment program will help:

- Reduce pain;
- Improve movement and posture;
- Strengthen muscles; and
- Improve independent function.

Movement loss caused by osteoarthritis follows a predictable pattern depending upon the affected joint. A physiotherapist can diagnose the progress of the disease by measuring the mobility of the joint, the strength of the supporting muscles and the limitations on your activities. The physiotherapist will then prescribe an exercise and activity program 'tailored' for your individual situation. An effective exercise program may help reduce the amount of pain medication you require, as well as:

- Maintain or increase mobility;
- Improve joint lubrication and nutrition;
- Restore muscle balance and flexibility;
- Improve circulation and endurance;
- Improve strength and stability; and
- Improve poor posture.

Range-of-motion and stretching exercises will help maintain the maximum possible movement in the joint

Stretching will help maintain or restore flexibility to the joint's muscles and tendons. Exercising in water is also beneficial as body weight is off the joints: exercising in water can also provide resistance to strengthen muscles.

Other treatments provided by a physiotherapist may include heat, electrical treatments, hydrotherapy, splints, and advice on preventing further joint damage. These treatments are often used in conjunction with anti-inflammatory medications that control inflammation and alleviate pain.

A physiotherapist can also provide you with suggestions on how to pace your everyday activities, so you can continue to do them in a way that causes the least problem. As a general rule, if any exercise hurts then DON'T DO IT. Sometimes, simple changes such as wearing rubber-soled shoes or sitting in a different chair may help ease your symptoms.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) represents physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants and physiotherapist students across Canada. CPA members are rehabilitation professionals dedicated to the health, mobility and fitness of Canadians.

Physiotherapists are primary health care professionals who combine their in-depth knowledge of the body and how it works with specialized hands-on clinical skills to assess, diagnose and treat symptoms of illness, injury or disability.

More than 20,000 registered physiotherapists work in Canada, in private clinics, general and rehabilitation hospitals, community health centres, residential care and assisted-living facilities, home visit agencies, workplaces, and schools.



What if I need surgery?

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative process that primarily affects the bony surfaces of the joint; in some cases surgery may be recommended if the damage is severe and causing significant pain. The muscles surrounding these joints often become weak and tighten as a secondary effect of the disease.

If you do require surgery, it is important to take steps to ensure that the muscles are as strong as possible, before the operation, so you can get the most benefit from the procedure. A physiotherapist can provide you with an exercise program that will help you maintain joint flexibility and optimal muscle strength in the months before your operation.

Regular exercises like swimming, exercising in water, walking or cycling are also recommended. If your osteoarthritis affects your neck or low-back, or if any joint appears hot, swollen or painful, do not perform exercises without first consulting your physiotherapist.



There are several other ways to help manage your osteoarthritis:

- Always 'respect pain' – don't keep ignoring the discomfort;
- Avoid overstressing joints – use proper body mechanics;
- Avoid jerky or sudden movements when possible;
- Maintain a healthy body weight;
- Use splints or walking aids if necessary; and
- Never overdo activity or exercise.