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[ARTHRITIS](https://www.verywellhealth.com/arthritis-overview-4582013)

# **What Is Arthritis?**

By

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Updated on February 10, 2020

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Arthritis is a group of [rheumatic diseases](https://www.verywellhealth.com/other-arthritis-types-4013583) and related conditions that have joint inflammation in common. The symptoms associated with arthritis include joint pain, stiffness, and swelling. [Osteoarthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/osteoarthritis-symptoms-4014403) and [rheumatoid arthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/overview-of-rheumatoid-arthritis-4164535) are the most common types, but there are many other forms. The treatment is different depending on the cause, but the goal is always to relieve pain and inflammation while maintaining function.

## **Arthritis Symptoms**

Joint and inflammation symptoms occur in most types of arthritis and rheumatic disease. These include joint pain, stiffness, swelling, limited range of motion, redness, fever, fatigue, malaise, and lumps and bumps.

While joint symptoms are considered the primary characteristic of arthritis, certain rheumatic diseases may affect other parts of the body. For example, [connective tissue](https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-connective-tissue-190043) (found in tendons, muscles, and skin) can be affected. Certain rheumatic conditions may also affect internal organs. The extra-articular manifestations and [systemic effects](https://www.verywellhealth.com/arthritis-can-be-systemic-disease-189646) may result in debilitating or even life-threatening complications.1﻿

[Symptoms of Arthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/arthritis-symptoms-4014327)

## **Causes**

The causes and risk factors for each of the 100 different forms of arthritis differ.2﻿ For most forms, it is believed that there are overlapping factors that increase the risk of developing the condition.

Broadly, arthritis types can be broken into four categories related to the mechanisms that lead to joint inflammation:

* **Degenerative arthritis:**The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis, in which the cartilage that cushions the bones in the joints is destroyed. This is often related to age, overuse, or injury.3﻿
* **Inflammatory arthritis** is an autoimmune process where your immune system mistakenly attacks your joints and other tissues. Rheumatoid arthritis and [psoriatic arthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/psoriatic-arthritis-facts-190195) are the most common forms. Genetics and environmental factors may play a role in developing these conditions.4﻿
* **Metabolic arthritis:**Problems clearing uric acid from the body can cause gout.
* **Infectious (septic) arthritis:** When bacteria or a virus infects the fluid surrounding a joint or the joint itself, arthritis (localized to that joint) can result.

One of the greatest [misconceptions about arthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/misconceptions-about-arthritis-187935) is that it is an "older person's disease." Actually, two-thirds of people with arthritis are under the age of 65, and 1 in every 250 children is affected by some type of arthritis or rheumatic condition.

[Causes and Risk Factors of Arthritis](https://www.verywellhealth.com/arthritis-causes-and-risk-factors-2549243)

## **Diagnosis**

An early, accurate diagnosis and early treatment are essential for arthritis, especially inflammatory types of arthritis. This process may begin with your primary care physician, but you may be referred to a rheumatologist for more in-depth evaluation.

A single symptom or test result is not enough to diagnose a specific type of arthritis, so your doctor will perform a physical examination, consider your medical history and symptoms, and run an array of blood tests and imaging studies.

The blood tests look for measures of inflammation and for antibodies that are seen in autoimmune types of arthritis. X-rays and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans are analyzed for typical patterns of joint involvement seen in different types of arthritis.

Other tests may be done to rule out other possible causes for your symptoms, diagnose comorbidities (even a co-occurring rheumatic disease), and/or identify specific types of arthritis, such as gout.

[How Arthritis Is Diagnosed](https://www.verywellhealth.com/arthritis-diagnosis-4014203)

## **Treatment**

There is no cure for most types of arthritis, so the focus is slowing the progression of the disease, protecting the joints from damage, controlling pain and other symptoms, and preserving function. The exception is the infectious type of arthritis where the underlying infection can be cured.

Work with your doctor to find the best combination of over-the-counter products, prescription medications, and things you can do at home. Examples of treatment and management options include:

* Over-the-counter and prescription pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications
* Corticosteroids, either oral or injected into the joint5﻿
* [Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)](https://www.verywellhealth.com/facts-about-dmards-188047)
* Biologic response modifiers (biologics)
* Weight loss
* Exercise
* Stress reduction
* Healthy eating

In some cases, surgery (such as joint replacement) may be considered, though generally only after other measures have failed.6﻿

###

# Arthritis

Medically reviewed by [Natalie Butler, RD, LD](https://www.healthline.com/medical-team) on August 14, 2017 — Written by Brindles Lee Macon and Lauren Reed-Guy

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## What is arthritis?

Arthritis is an inflammation of the joints. It can affect one joint or multiple joints. There are more than 100 different types of arthritis, with different causes and treatment methods. Two of the most common types are osteoarthritis (OA) and rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

The symptoms of arthritis usually develop over time, but they may also appear suddenly. Arthritis is most commonly seen in adults over the age of 65, but it can also develop in children, teens, and younger adults. Arthritis is more common in women than men and in people who are overweight.

## What are the symptoms of arthritis?

[Joint pain](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/joint-pain), [stiffness](https://www.healthline.com/health/stiff-joints), and swelling are the most common symptoms of arthritis. Your [range of motion](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/limited-range-of-motion) may also decrease, and you may experience [redness](https://www.healthline.com/health/skin-redness) of the skin around the joint. Many people with arthritis notice their symptoms are worse in the morning.

In the case of [RA](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis-symptoms), you may feel [tired](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/fatigue) or experience a [loss of appetite](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/anorexia) due to the inflammation the immune system’s activity causes. You may also become [anemic](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/anemia) — meaning your [red blood cell count](https://www.healthline.com/health/rbc-count) decreases — or have a slight [fever](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/fever). Severe RA can cause joint deformity if left untreated.

## What causes arthritis?

[Cartilage](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/understanding-aging-and-joints) is a firm but flexible connective tissue in your joints. It protects the joints by absorbing the pressure and shock created when you move and put stress on them. A reduction in the normal amount of this cartilage tissue cause some forms of arthritis.

Normal wear and tear causes [OA](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis), one of the most common forms of arthritis. An infection or injury to the joints can exacerbate this natural breakdown of cartilage tissue. Your risk of developing OA may be higher if you have a family history of the disease.

Another common form of arthritis, [RA](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis), is an [autoimmune disorder](https://www.healthline.com/health/autoimmune-disorders). It occurs when your body’s immune system attacks the tissues of the body. These attacks affect the synovium, a soft tissue in your joints that produces a [fluid](https://www.healthline.com/health/synovial-fluid-analysis) that nourishes the cartilage and lubricates the joints.

RA is a disease of the synovium that will invade and destroy a joint. It can eventually lead to the destruction of both bone and cartilage inside the joint.

The exact cause of the immune system’s attacks is unknown. But scientists have discovered [genetic markers](http://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/types/rheumatoid-arthritis/causes.php) that increase your risk of developing RA fivefold.

## How is arthritis diagnosed?

Seeing your primary care physician is a good first step if you’re unsure who to see for an arthritis diagnosis. They will perform a [physical exam](https://www.healthline.com/health/physical-examination) to check for fluid around the joints, [warm](https://www.healthline.com/symptom/joints-warm) or red joints, and limited range of motion in the joints. Your doctor can refer you to a specialist if needed.

If you’re experiencing severe symptoms, you may choose to schedule an appointment with a [rheumatologist](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis/managing-advancing-ra/reasons-to-see-your-rheumatologist) first. This may lead to a faster diagnosis and treatment.

Extracting and analyzing inflammation levels in your blood and joint fluids can help your doctor determine what kind of arthritis you have. Blood tests that check for specific types of antibodies like anti-CCP (anti-cyclic citrullinated peptide), [RF (rheumatoid factor)](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-factor-rf), and [ANA (antinuclear antibody)](https://www.healthline.com/health/antinuclear-antibody-panel#overview1) are also common diagnostic tests.

Doctors commonly use imaging scans such as [X-ray](https://www.healthline.com/health/x-ray), [MRI](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/what-does-arthritis-look-like-on-an-mri), and [CT scans](https://www.healthline.com/health/ct-scan) to produce an image of your bones and cartilage. This is so they can rule out other causes of your symptoms, such as [bone spurs](https://www.healthline.com/health/bone-spurs-osteophytosis).

## How is arthritis treated?

The main goal of treatment is to reduce the amount of pain you’re experiencing and prevent additional damage to the joints. You’ll learn what works best for you in terms of controlling pain. Some people find [heating pads and ice packs](https://www.healthline.com/health/chronic-pain/treating-pain-with-heat-and-cold) to be soothing. Others use mobility assistance devices, like canes or walkers, to help take pressure off sore joints.

Improving your joint function is also important. Your doctor may prescribe you a combination of treatment methods to achieve the best results.

[Shop heating pads for pain relief.](https://amzn.to/2EE61uv)

### Medication

A number of different types of medication treat arthritis:

* **Analgesics**, such as hydrocodone (Vicodin) or [acetaminophen](https://www.healthline.com/health/pain-relief/acetaminophen-tylenol-side-effects) (Tylenol), are effective for pain management, but don’t help decrease inflammation.
* **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**, such as [ibuprofen](https://www.healthline.com/health/pain-relief/ibuprofen-advil-side-effects) (Advil) and salicylates, help control pain and inflammation. Salicylates can thin the blood, so they should be used very cautiously with additional blood thinning medications.
* **Menthol or capsaicin** [**creams**](https://www.healthline.com/health/arthritis/creams) block the transmission of pain signals from your joints.
* [**Immunosuppressants**](https://www.healthline.com/health/immunosuppressant-drugs) like [prednisone](https://www.healthline.com/health/prednisone-oral-tablet) or [cortisone](https://www.healthline.com/health/cortisone-oral-tablet) help reduce inflammation.

If you have RA, your doctor may put you on corticosteroids or [disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs)](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis/dmards-tnf-alpha-inhibitors), which suppress your immune system. [There are also many medications to treat OA available over the counter or by prescription.](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/medications-list)

[Shop capsaicin creams for pain relief.](https://amzn.to/2EAVLmV)

### Surgery

Surgery to replace your joint with an artificial one may be an option. This form of surgery is most commonly performed to replace [hips](https://www.healthline.com/health/hip-joint-replacement) and [knees](https://www.healthline.com/health/total-knee-replacement-surgery).

If your arthritis is most severe in your [fingers](https://www.healthline.com/health/arthritis-fingers-pictures) or [wrists](https://www.healthline.com/health/arthritis-wrist), your doctor may perform a joint fusion. In this procedure, the ends of your bones are locked together until they heal and become one.

### Physical therapy

Physical therapy involving exercises that help strengthen the muscles around the affected joint is a core component of arthritis treatment.

## What lifestyle changes can help people with arthritis?

[Weight loss](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/knee-pain/link-between-weight-loss-and-knee-pain) and maintaining a healthy weight reduce the risk of developing OA and can reduce symptoms if you already have it.

Eating a [healthy diet](https://www.healthline.com/health-slideshow/8-foods-fight-arthritis) is important for weight loss. Choosing a diet with lots of [antioxidants](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/antioxidants-explained), such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs, can help reduce inflammation. Other [inflammation-reducing foods](https://www.healthline.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis/foods-that-reduce-inflammation) include fish and nuts.

Foods to minimize or [avoid](https://www.healthline.com/health-slideshow/foods-to-avoid-with-arthritis) if you have arthritis include fried foods, processed foods, dairy products, and high intakes of meat.

Some [research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282283479_Autoantibodies_against_gliadin_in_rheumatoid_arthritis_and_primary_Sjogren%27s_syndrome_patients_Autoprzeciwciala_przeciwko_gliadynie_u_chorych_na_reumatoidalne_zapalenie_stawow_oraz_pierwotny_zespo) also suggests that gluten antibodies may be present in people with RA. A gluten-free diet may improve symptoms and disease progression. A [2015 study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273700262_High_prevalence_of_gluten_sensitivity_in_a_cohort_of_patients_with_undifferentiated_connective_tissue_disease) also recommends a gluten-free diet for all people who receive a diagnosis of undifferentiated connective tissue disease.

[Regular exercise](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/exercises) will keep your joints flexible. [Swimming](https://www.healthline.com/health-slideshow/arthritis-water-exercises) is often a good form of exercise for people with arthritis because it doesn’t put pressure on your joints the way running and walking do. Staying active is important, but you should also be sure to rest when you need to and avoid [overexerting](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/why-too-much-exercise-can-be-bad-042514) yourself.

At-home exercises you can try include:

* the head tilt, neck rotation, and other exercises to relieve [pain in your neck](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/neck-exercises)
* finger bends and thumb bends to ease [pain in your hands](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/arthritis-hand-exercises)
* leg raises, [hamstring stretches](https://www.healthline.com/health/fitness-exercise/hamstring-exercises), and other [easy exercises for knee arthritis](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/easy-excercises-knee)

## What is the long-term outlook for people with arthritis?

While there’s no cure for arthritis, the right treatment can greatly reduce your symptoms.

In addition to the treatments your doctor recommends, you can make a number of lifestyle changes that may help you manage your arthritis.

### READ THIS NEXT

* [**Can Any Type of Arthritis Be Reversed?**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/can-arthritis-be-reversed)

Medically reviewed by Brenda B. Spriggs, MD, MPH, FACP

[There are many types of arthritis, which can be managed with a variety of treatments. We'll discuss whether any types are reversible.](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/can-arthritis-be-reversed)

[**READ MORE**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/can-arthritis-be-reversed)

* [**Arthritis Prescription Drug Voltaren Now Available Over the Counter**](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/prescription-arthritis-drug-voltaren-available-over-the-counter)

[A new FDA program is making it easier to make prescription drugs such as Voltaren available as over-the-counter medications.](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/prescription-arthritis-drug-voltaren-available-over-the-counter)

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* [**Easy Exercises for Knee Arthritis**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/easy-excercises-knee)

Medically reviewed by William Morrison, MD

[Exercising an arthritic knee can be a great way to relieve your pain and discomfort. Learn about easy exercises you can do at home. We'll show you…](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/easy-excercises-knee)

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* [**7 Hand Exercises to Ease Arthritis Pain**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/arthritis-hand-exercises)

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* [**Chondromalacia**](https://www.healthline.com/health/chondromalacia-patella)

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[Chondromalacia, or "runner's knee," causes the cartilage underneath the kneecap to deteriorate and soften. It's common among young, athletic…](https://www.healthline.com/health/chondromalacia-patella)

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* [**Everything You Need to Know About Osteoarthritis**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis)

Medically reviewed by Gregory Minnis, DPT

[If you live with osteoarthritis, you know it's a complex condition with a broad range of treatments and risk factors. Here's a detailed, top-to-bottom…](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis)

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* [**Eating Right for Osteoarthritis (OA) of the Knee**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/osteoarthritis-diet)

Medically reviewed by Katherine Marengo, LDN, RD

[Can what you eat affect the severity of your osteoarthritis symptoms? We'll offer some delicious recipes and show you how your diet could play a role…](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/osteoarthritis-diet)

[**READ MORE**](https://www.healthline.com/health/osteoarthritis/osteoarthritis-diet)

* [**The 10 Best Foods to Eat If You Have Arthritis**](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/10-foods-for-arthritis)

Written by Rachael Link, MS, RD

[Arthritis is a condition that causes joint pain, stiffness and swelling. This article discusses 10 foods that can help relieve inflammation and fight…](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/10-foods-for-arthritis)

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* [**5 Best Arthritis Gloves on the Market**](https://www.healthline.com/health/best-arthritis-gloves)

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* [**How Collagen Can Boost Your Body’s Skin, Muscle, and Gut**](https://www.healthline.com/health/collagen-powder-benefits)

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