

Physio 4 You

Osteoarthritis



Although it is the most common form of arthritis, osteoarthritis (OA) is just one of around 100 types of arthritic conditions. OA occurs when cartilage within joints wears down over time, which is why it is sometimes known as degenerative arthritis or degenerative joint disease. The risk of developing OA increases with age, with most people experiencing some form of the condition by age 70.

OA can occur in any joint in the body but is most common in the knees, hips, hands, neck and back as they are typically subjected to the greatest stress during general daily activity. Any factor that increases load on the joints will also increase your risk of OA.

Some factors include:

- Performing heavy or repetitive work (the back, hands and shoulders are particularly at risk with this).
- Having poor sitting or standing posture (joints are put in awkward or unnatural positions which can lead to progressive joint overload).
- Excessive body weight. This places additional stress on the back, hips and knees.

Although OA cannot be cured, there are many treatments that can decrease the symptoms and improve your quality of life.

Symptoms

Symptoms of OA include pain, joint stiffness, clicking sensations, cracking or grating, occasional swelling and joint deformity. In its early stages, pain and stiffness will often be worse in the morning, ease as the joint 'warms up' then deteriorate again with increased activity, or after periods of inactivity, such as sitting for long periods.

As the condition progresses and the joint degenerates, the cartilage may wear out completely causing bones to rub against each other with pain more prominent at rest. Bony spurs may also develop as the OA progresses, potentially causing increased pain and a sensation of the joint 'locking' when attempting to move in certain directions.



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What can you do?

Simple medications:

- Regular paracetamol is an option to help reduce osteoarthritic pain in the short term. Use only as directed. Incorrect use can be harmful. Consult your health care practitioner if pain and symptoms persist.
- Topical non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may also have some symptomatic benefit (speak with your GP about this). Use only as directed. Incorrect use can be harmful. Consult your health care practitioner if pain and symptoms persist.
- Natural therapies: Glucosamine is a sugar naturally produced by the body. It is believed these supplements may be useful in treating OA where there has been a breakdown of cartilage. It is thought that taking glucosamine and/or chondroitin may relieve the pain and prevent and slow down the cartilage breakdown associated with OA. Research on this has been inconclusive to date (www.arthritisvic.org.au).

Cold and heat:

- Ice: Application of an ice pack to the affected area for 20 minutes can be beneficial during an acute flare-up in symptoms. This is important if there is any swelling and heat in the area.
- Heat: If the symptoms have not flared-up recently and the primary complaint is mild pain or joint stiffness application of a heat pack for 15-20 minutes at a time may be preferable.

Modifying activities:

Often the symptoms of OA worsen with prolonged activity. Simple modifications to the activities that are causing pain can help, without having to cease them all together.

Lifestyle changes:

One of the most important things you can do to reduce the symptoms of osteoarthritis is to manage your weight with regular exercise and a controlled diet.

What can physiotherapy do?

A physiotherapist will conduct a series of clinical tests to diagnose the extent of your condition. In some cases, an X-ray may be taken to confirm the diagnosis. Once this thorough assessment has been completed, your physiotherapist will work with you to create a treatment plan and establish management goals.



Your treatment will typically include hands-on therapies such as massage, stretching and passive joint mobilisation to encourage full range of motion and to decrease muscle spasm/tightness. You will also be provided with a suitable exercise program designed to stretch and strengthen muscles surrounding the affected joints while minimising your pain. Your physiotherapist may also provide you with ideas for diet and weight management. He or she will also identify any other potential treatment modalities such as hydrotherapy, acupuncture and dry needling which may help.

Contact details

133 East Boundary Road,
BENTLEIGH EAST VIC 3165

P 03 9570 1254 F 03 9579 6130

info@ebrphysio.com.au