

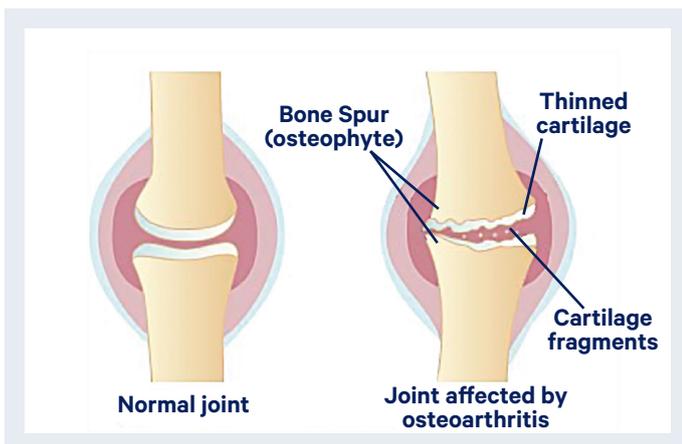
Osteoarthritis

WHAT IS IS OSTEOARTHRITIS AND HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Osteoarthritis has been called “joint wear and tear” or “degenerative” arthritis. Osteoarthritis can occur in any joint in the body but most commonly occurs in the hands and weight-bearing joints such as hips, knees, feet and spine. In healthy joints cartilage, a smooth tissue, that covers the ends of the bones acts as a shock absorber and provides a smooth surface between the bones to allow easy movement.



When a joint develops osteoarthritis the cartilage thins and becomes rough. In some cases the cartilage breaks down, leaving the bones unprotected. The joint loses its ability to move smoothly. The bones lose shape and thicken at the end, producing bony spurs (or growths). Pieces of cartilage may break off and float around in the joint. This can disturb other tissues in the joint, causing pain and swelling.



There are many factors that increase the risk of getting osteoarthritis including

- Age. Osteoarthritis usually starts in the late 40's or later and is uncommon in those under 40. It may be due to several factors that come with growing older, muscles become weaker, weight may increase, and the body is less able to heal itself.
- Gender. Osteoarthritis is more common and worse in women, particularly in the knee and hand joints.

- Heredity. Osteoarthritis of the fingers and hands often runs in families, particularly in women.
- Joint injury. Hard repetitive physical activity may injure joints leading to osteoarthritis in later life. This explains why osteoarthritis is more common in people in some physically demanding jobs, such as builders.
- Excessive weight. This is one of the most significant risk factors in causing osteoarthritis, especially of the weight-bearing joints such as the hips and knees. Being overweight also increases the chances of osteoarthritis worsening once it has developed.



HOW IS OSTEOARTHRITIS TREATED?

Hand Therapy

There is no cure for osteoarthritis, however there are many things you can do to reduce your symptoms and the impact of osteoarthritis on your life. The treatment for arthritis is learning to manage it. Below are some ways you can do this.

Joint Protection

You can learn to take stress off your joints with the concept of the **4 P's**. When you need to complete day to day tasks first **Prioritise** which tasks are most important, then **Plan** your week to spread the tasks out. **Pace** each task by taking small breaks while doing them and finally look at your **Posture and Positioning** when doing the tasks.

You can use splints to take pressure off your hand joints when using them. These can be rigid or soft supports and will depend on what your hand therapist decides will be most useful for you

You can also use equipment to help make the tasks easier. Your therapist can show you examples of these that you may find helpful.

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Exercise

A properly designed exercise programme will not cause more damage to your joints but will reduce your pain, increase your flexibility and overall fitness. Doing this will help keep and improve joint movement, reduce pain and stiffness and help to improve muscle strength, your energy and sense of well-being. In many communities there are excellent programmes for people with arthritis including tai chi, walking, swimming, gentle exercise classes or hydrotherapy (gentle exercise in a heated pool).

Heat and Cold

Heat promotes blood circulation and can reduce pain and stiffness in a joint with arthritis. Having a hot shower in the morning may help you get ready for the day ahead. If your joint is hot and swollen already use a cold pack which can help reduce pain by reducing the blood flow to that area.

Medication

Painkillers are often recommended by your doctor or pharmacist to reduce pain and stiffness, however they do not treat the arthritis itself. Paracetamol is the simplest and safest painkiller and is usually recommended as the medication to try first. Never take more than the recommended or prescribed dose. If you require something stronger than Paracetamol or have questions about pain relief options discuss this with your doctor or hand specialist.

Complementary Therapies

Research has shown that some complementary products and therapies can be helpful in managing symptoms of osteoarthritis. Acupuncture was found to reduce pain and improve function in arthritis. However, the study didn't show that these effects continued in the longer term.

Surgery

If damage to a joint is very bad, surgery to replace or repair the joint may be recommended. Artificial joints can last 10–20 years before they need to be replaced. This is why joint replacement surgery is delayed until it is really needed.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM MY REHABILITATION?

Your hand therapist will provide you with education regarding how you can manage your arthritis for yourself at home. You might be given splints that you can wear to help prevent more stress on your joints. You normally wear the splint while you are doing activities that you know make your joints sore.

If your symptoms do not approve with hand therapy, your hand therapist may refer you to a hand surgeon to discuss further treatment options.

Do

- Remember to wear your splint as you find helpful.
- Avoid or change the way you do the activities that bring on your symptoms.
- Rest between activities, especially if you are doing anything heavy or repetitive.
- Explore the best ways to manage your symptoms and use these regularly.

Do Not

- Do lots of forceful gripping at one time.
- Ignore your symptoms and pain, as these could get worse overtime if you do.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

- Look out for activity that causes pain or swelling in your hand and arm, try to avoid it, and tell your hand therapist.
- If your pain is getting worse you can return to your hand therapist or GP for a reassessment. If needed you can be referred to a hand surgeon to discuss other ways of managing your arthritis.
- If your splint is uncomfortable or rubbing book an appointment to see your hand therapist.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DO NOT HAVE TREATMENT?

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease that will continue to worsen over time. You can however slow down the degeneration and reduce the pain by managing the symptoms.



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CONTACT DETAILS AND REFERENCES

Your hand therapist is _____

Merivale Hand Clinic (03) 3559775

www.arthritis.org.nz

www.healthnavigator.org.nz

www.arthritisresearchuk.org

www.rheumatology.org.au

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