

Arthritis in the elderly

Arthritis means inflamed joints, and there are many types of arthritis. The most common type is *osteoarthritis*, which is a problem of wear and tear due to excessive use over the years and to old injuries in the affected joints. Most cases of arthritis are mild, and people cope with it. Arthritis does not necessarily get worse as you get older; sometimes it can get less painful (arthritis in the lumbar spine is a good example of this).

What are the symptoms of osteoarthritis?

- Pain, swelling or stiffness in one or more joints
- Pain or stiffness in the back or neck
- Pain and stiffness after heavy activity such as gardening or housework or long walks and on getting up in the mornings; light activity might actually relieve some of the symptoms
- Painful limp in the case of the hip and knee

Which joints are affected?

Osteoarthritis mostly affects the weight-bearing joints such as the spine, knees and hips. The base of the thumb, the ends of the fingers and the big toes are also common sites.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure, but there are many ways to make life more comfortable and keep you mobile and independent.

Diet

Keep your weight down to avoid unnecessary wear on the joints. No particular diet has been proved to cause, or improve, osteoarthritis.

Exercise

Keep a good balance of adequate rest with sensible exercise (such as walking, cycling and swimming), but *stop* any exercise or activity that increases the pain.

Heat

It is usual to feel more comfortable when the weather is warm. A hot-water bottle, warm bath or electric blanket can soothe the pain and stiffness. Avoid getting too cold.

Physiotherapy

This can be most helpful in improving muscle tone, reducing stiffness and keeping you mobile.

Walking aids

Shoe inserts, good footwear and a walking stick can help painful knees, hips and feet.

Medication

Aspirin and paracetamol are effective pain-killers. Your doctor may prescribe special antiarthritic medications, which should be taken with food. Inform your doctor

if you have had a peptic ulcer or get indigestion. There are new drugs which are kinder to your stomach. Glucosamine has proved effective for osteoarthritis of the knee in many people.

Special equipment

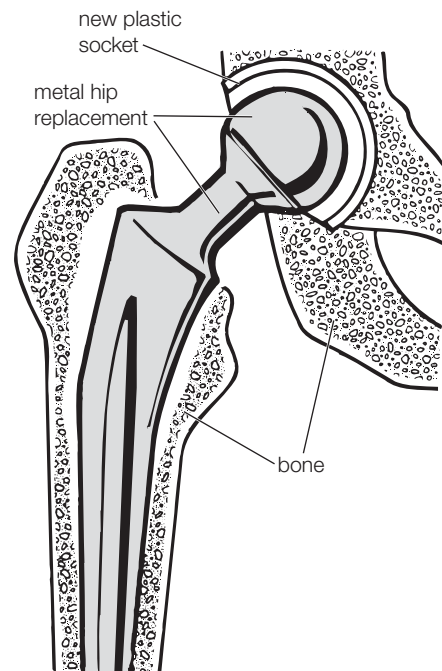
It is possible to increase your independence at home. There is a wide range of inexpensive equipment and tools that can help with cooking, cleaning and other household chores. These can be discussed with your physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

Surgery

Modern surgery can give excellent results with relief of severe pain for most joints. The new techniques and artificial joints are improving all the time, and so there is no need to suffer with prolonged severe pain.

Osteoarthritis of the hip

Replacement of your worn-out joint with an artificial hip made of a combination of metal or plastic is a very common operation. More than 90% of these are most successful.



Total hip joint replacement

Osteoarthritis of the knee

Special injections of lubricating fluids for the knee which are now available can provide temporary relief.

Modern knee replacements are also giving excellent results, and if you have crippling knee pain this operation can give great relief.