

# Osteoarthritis

## A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH OSTEOARTHRITIS

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### What is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis. It can happen in any joint but is most often in the hands, hips, knees and spine. In osteoarthritis, there is a breakdown of the cartilage on the ends of bones. Healthy cartilage is firm, rubbery and smooth. It acts as a shock absorber. The slippery surface of cartilage allows joints to glide easily. Usually in early OA there is no swelling. Later, bits of cartilage may break off and disturb other tissue in the joint. This can cause pain and swelling. Over time, the bones can change, creating bumps, called spurs. The cartilage may wear away completely and bones may rub together.

### What causes Osteoarthritis?

Researchers are studying how the cartilage breaks down. They have found some enzymes that damage cartilage. These enzymes can occur with extra stress in the joint. Factors that increase your chance of getting OA include:

- Previous injury to the joint
- Repeated stress on the joint, such as heavy physical activity or being overweight
- Heredity, and
- Getting older.

### What can I do about Osteoarthritis?

Learn about OA. Become skilled at setting goals and solving problems. These skills help you apply the things you learn. A self-management program, such as Arthritis Self-Management Program (ASMP) from The Arthritis Society is a good place to start. If not available or convenient, try other group or home-based programs for relaxation, weight control, and balancing exercise with rest to improve your comfort and function.

Regular exercise helps reduce pain and improve function because:

- strong muscles help protect painful joints, help maintain balance and prevent falls;
- joint movement helps nourish the cartilage;
- flexible muscles allow the body to use less painful positions; and
- fitness exercises help maintain body weight, reduce stress, improve sleep and reduce fatigue.

Consider walking, swimming, Pilates and Tai Chi.

Generally, a sign that you've done too much exercise is increased pain in the joint lasting longer than two hours after the exercise has ended. Next time do a bit less. If you have difficulty exercising, you may need advice from a physical therapist.

An occupational therapist can advise you how to reduce stress to your joints while continuing your daily activities. This may include advice about:

- Methods to make daily tasks easier including tools such as jar openers;
- Proper posture, sleeping positions, and work station set up;
- Proper footwear and orthotics supports;
- Splints or braces to protect joints, and
- Getting a better sleep including mattresses, pillows and relaxation.

There are many medications available including creams and gels, acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®), non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and injections. All medications have possible side effects whether taken alone or with herbal or over-the-counter medication. Your doctor will help you find a medication to reduce your pain with minimal risks. Your pharmacist can also help with medication questions. Your doctor may recommend surgery if the joint is significantly damaged or if your pain is not well controlled. Surgery for OA can include removing torn cartilage from the joint, realigning bones around the knee or replacing the joint with an artificial joint.

### **How do I learn more?**

- The Arthritis Helpbook by K. Lorig and J. Fries (at libraries and bookstores and The Arthritis Society)
- Arthritis Information Line (toll free): 1-800-321-1433 (or 604-875-5051) or [info@bc.arthritis.ca](mailto:info@bc.arthritis.ca)
- The Arthritis Society website: [www.arthritis.ca/bc](http://www.arthritis.ca/bc)
- The Arthritis Resource Guide for BC website: [www.argbc.ca](http://www.argbc.ca)
- Arthritis Foundation: [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- Find a Physical Therapist in BC at [www.bcphysio.org](http://www.bcphysio.org) or call 604-736-5130
- Find an Occupational Therapist in BC at <http://www.bcsot.org> or call 604-736-5645 or 1-888-736-5645.
- Dial-a-Dietician at 1-800-667-3438 or 604-732-9191
- BC Primary Health Care Web site: <http://www.primaryhealthcarebc.ca>
- BC Health Guide Handbook or online at: [www.bchealthguide.org](http://www.bchealthguide.org).
- BC Nurse Line ( 24 hour advice & information) at 1-866-215-4700 or 604 215-4700 or hearing impaired 1-866-TTY-4700
- OASIS, Vancouver Coastal Health OsteoArthritis Service Integration System (Web site [www.vch.ca/oasis](http://www.vch.ca/oasis))
- Arthritis Consumer Experts (website [www.arthritisconsumerexperts.org](http://www.arthritisconsumerexperts.org))
- CAPA, Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance (website [www.arthritis.ca/capa](http://www.arthritis.ca/capa))
- Telephone book: (1) Red Cross Equipment Loans & (2) Recreation Centres

Hint: When searching the internet for information, look for sites with “.edu”, “.org” or “.gov”. Universities and governments are often reliable sites. Be aware that some sites with .com may be selling products.