

Understanding Arthritis - Diagnosis & Treatment

How Is Arthritis Diagnosed?

A diagnosis of arthritis is the first step toward arthritis treatment. In addition to arthritis symptoms and a doctor's examination, blood tests and X-rays are commonly used to confirm rheumatoid arthritis. Most people with rheumatoid arthritis have antibodies called rheumatoid factors (RF) in their blood, although RF may also be present in other disorders.

X-rays are used to diagnose osteoarthritis, typically revealing a loss of cartilage, bony spurs, and bone rubbing against bone. Sometimes blood tests and joint aspiration (using a needle to draw a small sample of fluid from the joint for testing) are used to rule out other types of arthritis. If your doctor suspects infectious arthritis as a complication of some other disease, testing a sample of fluid from the affected joint will usually confirm the diagnosis.

What Are the Treatments of Arthritis?

Treatment of arthritis generally includes occupational or physical therapy, exercise, drugs, and sometimes surgery to correct joint damage. Treatments for osteoarthritis generally can help relieve pain and stiffness, but the disease may continue to progress. The same was true for rheumatoid arthritis in the past. But newer treatments for rheumatoid arthritis have been able to slow or stop progression of arthritis damage.

The duration and intensity of pain and discomfort depend on the type of arthritis you have and the degree of severity.

Conventional Medicine for Arthritis

In the case of localized pain, stiffness, and immobility, the typical three-stage treatment consists of medication to relieve pain and inflammation, rest to let injured tissues heal themselves, and exercise to rebuild mobility and strength.

Joint Protection for Arthritis

Learning to protect your joints is an important part of arthritis treatment. With the help of an occupational therapist, you can learn easier ways to do your normal activities, such as avoiding positions that strain your joints: using your strongest joints and muscles while sparing weaker ones; wearing braces or supports for certain joints; using grab bars in the bath; using modified doorknobs, canes, or walkers; and using devices to help you with tasks such as opening jars or pulling up socks and zippers. Your doctor may recommend pain relievers combined with regimens of rest, exercise, physical therapy, and controlled application of deep heat to soothe affected joints.

Arthritis Medication

To reduce pain and inflammation in mild cases of rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, your doctor will probably prescribe aspirin or another nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), such as naproxen or ibuprofen. Your doctor may also suggest acetaminophen.

In more advanced cases, your doctor may recommend corticosteroid joint injections - strong anti-inflammatories - to ease the pain and stiffness of affected joints. Depending on the individual, results range from temporary relief to long-lasting suppression of symptoms. Doctors are also using hyaluronate gel-like solutions in joint injections to further restore the cushioning and lubricating properties of normal joint fluid, thereby minimizing pain. Some examples are Hyalgan, Synvisc, Supartz, and Orthovisc.

In the early 1900s, researchers discovered that certain compounds containing gold, given orally or by injection, gave relief to some people who have rheumatoid arthritis and caused total remission in others.

Note, however, that because the side effects of gold treatment can range from minor skin rash to severe blood and kidney disorders, this treatment is generally approached with caution and rarely used these days.

Newer treatments have produced dramatic improvements in rheumatoid arthritis, and these treatments show great promise in preserving joint function. These newer medications for rheumatoid arthritis include methotrexate, Arava, Azulfidine, Enbre, Imuran, Neoral, Plaquenil, Remicade, Humira, Kineret, Rituxan, and Orencia. In general, these medications work by suppressing the overactive immune system.

Apheresis is another treatment for rheumatoid arthritis that removes antibodies from the blood. It's rarely used.

In cases of arthritis, specific treatment will depend on the nature and seriousness of the underlying condition. The major concern is for healing the affected area before more serious problems occur. Treatment of infectious arthritis typically involves large intravenous doses of antibiotics as well as drainage of excess infected fluid from the joints.

Arthritis Surgery

Various forms of surgery may be needed to reduce the discomfort of arthritis or to restore mobility or joint function. Synovectomy is the removal of damaged connective tissue lining a joint cavity; this allows the body to regenerate new, healthy tissue in its place. This operation is most common in the knee, hands, and wrists. In cases of severe arthritis damage to the neck or foot bones can be surgically removed or fused. Although movement is limited after such surgery, the operations relieve excruciating pain and help prevent further damage to nerves or blood vessels.

If arthritic pain and inflammation become truly unbearable, or arthritic joints simply refuse to function, the answer may lie in surgical joint replacement. Today, knee and hip joints can be replaced with reliable artificial joints made of stainless steel and plastic. Shoulder joints, as well as smaller joints in the elbows and fingers can also be replaced.

Management of Arthritis Pain

Because one of the most trying aspects of arthritis is learning to live with pain, many doctors recommend training in pain management, including cognitive therapy. The National Institutes of Health has found that cognitive behavioral therapy, using education and behavior modification alongside relaxation techniques, is better than routine care for relieving pain associated with arthritis. Such programs focus on improving patients' emotional and psychological well-being by teaching them how to relax and conduct their daily activities at a realistic pace. Learning to overcome mental stress and anxiety can be the key to coping with the physical limitations that may accompany chronic rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Cognitive therapy may include various techniques for activity scheduling, imaging, relaxation, distraction, and creative problem-solving.

Alternative Medicine for Arthritis

A variety of alternative therapies are used for arthritis. None of these alternative therapies have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of arthritis and therefore may not be safe. It is important to let your doctor know if you're considering these types of therapies.

While some studies suggest that glucosamine and chondroitin supplements are as effective as NSAIDs for reducing pain, swelling, and stiffness in osteoarthritis, recent large studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggest that these supplements are not very helpful except perhaps in the most severe cases. Typical daily doses are 1,500 milligrams for glucosamine and 1,200 milligrams for chondroitin. Glucosamine can raise blood sugar, so be sure to talk to your doctor before taking it, especially if you have diabetes.

The antibiotic doxycycline may have some potential to delay the progression of osteoarthritis by inhibiting enzymes that break down cartilage. More research is needed to confirm these results.

The National Institutes of Health considers acupuncture an acceptable alternative treatment for osteoarthritis, especially for knee osteoarthritis. Studies have shown that acupuncture helps reduce pain, may significantly lessen the need for painkillers, and can help increase range of motion in affected knee joints.

Available over-the-counter since 1999, the supplement **SAMe** has been shown in some studies to be as effective for osteoarthritis pain as NSAIDs, with the added benefit of fewer side effects.

Homeopathy may improve arthritis pain, joint tenderness, stiffness, and grip strength, especially when used in conjunction with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (**NSAIDs**).

Fish oil has been shown to reduce inflammation, lessen the need for painkillers, and possibly decrease joint stiffness. A diet low in animal and dairy fats may have similar effects. Excellent sources of fish oil include

EPNDHA capsules and oily fish such as salmon and mackerel.

At least a dozen different herbs have been used to ease the symptoms of both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis; most are considered anti-inflammatories. Ask your doctor about using any herbs, since they can interact with each other or with medication you are taking. In most cases, lack of careful studies means little is known about long-term effects. Herbs that have been used are powdered ginger, borage seed oil, or devil's claw to reduce pain and swelling. Stinging nettles or tumeric may also lessen pain, stiffness, and inflammation.

Ayurvedic medicine uses herbal compounds internally and externally for arthritis symptom relief. Topical curcumin may help relieve the inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis; if taken in capsule form, it can reduce morning stiffness and boost endurance. In one study, a combination of *Withenia somnifera*, *Boswellia serrata*, and *Cucurma longa* caused a significant drop in pain and disability for people with osteoarthritis.

Home Remedies for Arthritis

Heat and rest, traditional remedies for arthritis pain, are very effective in the short run for most people with the disease. Overweight sufferers should lose weight, especially when arthritis affects the lower back, knees, and legs. Consult a registered dietitian who can help you plan a healthy weight loss program.

In addition to treatments recommended by your doctor, you can use dry heat from a heating pad or moist heat in the form of a hot bath or a hot-water bottle wrapped in a towel to help relieve pain and stiffness. Regular exercise is important to keep the joints mobile. People with weakened, badly deformed fingers from rheumatoid arthritis benefit from specially designed utensils and door and drawer handles; people suffering weakness in the legs and arms can use special bathroom fixtures, especially tub rails and elevated toilet seats.

Though arthritis is not preventable, many people are able to prevent disability with a well-designed treatment program, including medications, exercise, and physical therapy when needed.