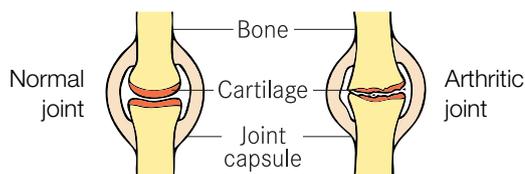


## What is arthritis?

Arthritis literally means 'inflammation of a joint'. There are many types of arthritis, and most cause pain, swelling, limited movement and stiffness.

In normal bones, the ends are lined by cartilage, which provides 'cushioning' and allows a joint to move freely. The joint is enclosed in a capsule containing fluid, which provides nutrition, and lubricates the joint. Arthritis can occur when there is something wrong with this system.



## What causes arthritis?

There are at least 150 types of arthritis. *Osteoarthritis* and *Rheumatoid arthritis* are most common. *Septic arthritis* is a medical emergency.

- **Osteoarthritis** – is essentially caused by 'wear and tear', where a breakdown of the cartilage allows the bones to rub together. This can be painful. It usually occurs later in life and affects the hips and knees, although it can also cause problems in the spine, shoulders, hands or any other joint.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis** – is less common but more severe. It occurs when your immune system attacks the tissue lining the joints, and can lead to pain, swelling, stiffness and joint deformity. The joints most affected are the hands, wrists, shoulders, knees or feet. The cause is not known. Women are affected more than men.
- **Septic arthritis** – is an infection in a joint that causes pain, redness, heat and swelling of the affected joint. You may also have a fever and feel unwell. The most commonly affected joint is the knee, but it can also occur in the ankle, hip or wrist. This is a serious condition that needs treatment with antibiotics and an operation in which the joint is washed out.

## What are the symptoms?

All types of arthritis can result in pain, stiffness and inflammation (a hot, swollen and tender joint). Arthritis can affect you at any age.

The severity, location and progression of arthritis can vary greatly from person to person. For many people the cause is not known. You may or may not have another family member

with arthritis. Rheumatoid pain is often worse in the morning, while osteoarthritis results in stiffness at end of day. Gout can occur at any time.

If you get sudden pain and swelling in a joint, this may be septic arthritis and you need to see your doctor to rule this out.

## What is gout?

Gout (also called *metabolic arthritis*) occurs when *uric acid* crystals form in and around joints, causing sudden and intense pain, redness and swelling. It mainly affects men over 40 and is usually found in the big toe, but can occur in almost any joint. Gout may be inherited, caused by dehydration and bad diet, or due to the side effects of medication such as fluid tablets. Alcohol and eating rich food can make it worse. Gout may also lead to kidney stones.

## Treatment

Blood tests and X-rays may be needed to diagnose the type of arthritis or gout. A sample of fluid (*aspirate*) may be taken from the joint to test for infection and gout crystals.

There is no cure for arthritis. However, with the right treatment arthritis can be managed. Treatments include anti-inflammatory and anti-arthritis medications, injections and occasionally surgery.

Gout is treated with medication, such as *colchicine*, or anti-inflammatory medications. See your doctor before you take *colchicine*, as it has some side effects that you need to discuss. *Allopurinol* is used to lower uric acid levels and prevent episodes of gout, but may make it worse in a flare up of gout. Speak to your doctor about what medication is right for you during a flare up of gout.

## Home care

There are many ways to make life more comfortable.

- Regular exercise can reduce pain and improve function for most people.
- Do not exercise a painful, swollen or hot joint. If an exercise causes pain, stop.
- A physiotherapist can help you improve your muscle tone, reduce stiffness and keep you mobile. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist about the right exercises for you.
- Maintain a healthy weight to avoid excess pressure and wear on your joints.
- Maintain a good posture at all times.
- Wear supportive footwear.

- There is a wide range of tools that can help with cooking, cleaning and other household chores. These can be found at larger pharmacies or discussed with an occupational therapist.
- Use wheat bags and heat packs, a hot bath or lotions such as *Deep Heat* to soothe pain and stiffness. Do not use when a joint is hot and swollen.
- There is evidence that *glucosamine* (available as tablets) can lessen pain and improve function for some people with osteoarthritis.
- Take simple painkillers such as paracetamol if necessary.
- The effectiveness of many herbal remedies and nutritional supplements is not known. Ask your local doctor or health care professional for advice before taking any over-the-counter medication.
- Complementary therapies such as massage, electrical stimulation, acupuncture, Tai Chi and homeopathy may increase comfort, although research has not established if there are any real benefits.
- If you suffer from gout, restrict your intake of organ meats (such as kidney, brain and liver), shellfish and tinned fish, and avoid alcohol.

## What to expect

- Most people lead a normal or near-normal life. Arthritis can be mild and well controlled. It does not always get worse as you get older.
- Rheumatoid arthritis may go into remission for a period of time.
- For some people, arthritis can cause deformed joints, which may lead to stiffness, severe pain and loss of function. Surgery may be helpful for these people.
- Gout may last a few hours to a few days depending on how quickly treatment is started. Some people may need to go on to daily medication to prevent more attacks.

## Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



See your local doctor or health care professional if you:

- have pain that does not improve with painkillers
- have increased severe joint swelling
- have increased stiffness
- feel generally unwell with a fever
- cannot function at home.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

**NURSE-ON-CALL** provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

\*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



## Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Contact **Arthritis Victoria**  
Call 1800 011 041  
[www.arthritisvic.org.au](http://www.arthritisvic.org.au)
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

## Notes:

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email [edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au)



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