

# Understanding osteoarthritis

## What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a joint problem that can cause chronic (persistent) joint pain and difficulties with daily activities. It commonly occurs at the hip and knee joints. Osteoarthritis affects the whole joint including cartilage, bone, ligaments and muscles. Osteoarthritis is an active process of your body responding to small injuries to your joints. It is this active process that initially causes the joint pain.

There are many things you can do to help with your osteoarthritis pain and the outlook for most people is very positive. With the right approach there is every chance you will be able to keep doing all the things that are important to you.

## Diagnosing osteoarthritis

Your doctor will usually diagnose you with knee osteoarthritis if you:

- **Are aged 45 or over**
- **Have joint pain when you are active that has lasted more than 3 months**
- **Have either no morning joint stiffness or morning stiffness that lasts no longer than 30 minutes**
- **Have no history suggestive of another health problem (your doctor will check for other health problems).**

X-rays are not required to diagnose osteoarthritis or to decide on the best treatments for you. This is because x-ray results are poorly related to how much pain, stiffness or disability you may experience, and x-rays do not tell us which treatments will be most beneficial for you.

## What causes osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is more common in older people, but can affect younger people as well.

Some things that increase the risk of developing osteoarthritis include obesity (particularly for knee), sporting injuries and prolonged/repetitive occupational tasks (e.g. kneeling). However, for many people the cause is not known. It does not matter if the cause of osteoarthritis is unknown, as the cause does not influence the management plan.

## What causes osteoarthritis pain?

Pain in osteoarthritis is complex. Changes to the knee tissues, your mood, anxiety and stress levels, poor sleep or fatigue or sometimes just focusing too much on the pain can all affect your experience of pain.

Pain can make you avoid activity and can affect your mood and sleep. But inactivity leads to muscle weakness, weight gain, feelings of joint instability and can make your mood and sleep problems worse. These factors can affect each other to create a cycle that makes your pain feel even worse.

Staying active, losing weight (if you need to) and strengthening your muscles can help with the pain and can stop the cycle of decline, as well as improve your overall health.

## What will happen over time?

For most people, osteoarthritis will be stable with occasional flare-ups from time to time.

While a flare will make you feel worse for a little while, the pain will usually settle down again in time.

Most people's osteoarthritis will not become severe enough to need a joint replacement.

In fact, your pain may improve over time.

Taking control of your osteoarthritis and learning ways to manage your pain are really important. Finding a team of trusted health professionals, and others who can provide support and understanding, will help you manage as your needs change over time.

### Common osteoarthritis beliefs that are all FALSE

- Pain comes from wearing down of the cartilage
- Osteoarthritis always gets worse over time
- Exercise will further damage the joint
- There is nothing to be done for the pain
- Joint replacement surgery is always needed