

Help! My Knees Hurt!

If you are able to get out of bed, and run or even walk without pain, consider yourself blessed. There are many who are virtually in tears with every step they take.

One common cause of such pain in weight-bearing joints, is Osteoarthritis (also referred to as 'wear and tear' disease). There are several types of arthritis, but osteoarthritis is the commonest one, and we will restrict our discussion to this.

Osteoarthritis is a degeneration of the smooth cartilage overlying the bones. This eventually leads to excessive growth of the bones at the joint surface.

What do people experience?

- A usually gradual onset
- Decreased mobility and mild morning stiffness, often lasting less than thirty minutes
- Initially, pain occurring with movement, and relieved by rest
- As the disease progresses, pain occurring even during rest, and more common at night.

Who is most at risk?

- Those beyond forty years old
- The obese
- Those with injured or overused joints
- Those with a family history of osteoarthritis
- Those with muscle weakness.

Which joints are most often affected? Weight-bearing joints, including:

- Knees
- Hips
- Vertebrae (backbone).

What does management of Osteoarthritis involve?

- Weight loss, if obese
- Exercises to improve joint mobility, strengthen muscles, and relieve pain
- Physiotherapy (use of therapeutic processes in addition to exercises)
- Pain killers.

Why is exercise important for people with osteoarthritis (and other forms of arthritis)?

- It increases strength and flexibility around joints
- It helps maintain or increase bone strength

- It provides nourishment and lubrication to joints
- It prevents muscles from wasting away from lack of use.

What is the preferred frequency and time of exercising?

- Daily
- When there is the least amount of pain and stiffness
- When you are least tired
- When you receive the maximum benefit from your medications, but do not overdose to mask pain.

What important points should I note?

- Prepare for exercise by thermally warming up the affected joint(s) using massage, a heating pad, a warm shower, or gentle rhythmic movements
- Never exercise a swollen, tender, 'red' joint
- Non-weight-bearing exercises are preferred: these include swimming, water exercise and stationary biking
- Avoid vigorously exercising a painful joint. Running, skipping and group aerobic sessions (that are not specific for arthritis) are a no-go area.

Dear reader, remember that this condition may be life-long and you will have bad days sometimes. Do take a break from physical activity when the joint hurts badly, but NEVER QUIT!!

Remember, only your doctor can make a diagnosis of osteoarthritis, and he/she will often advise on the course of management. In certain cases, surgical intervention is necessary.

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Sources:

- Fitness Therapy 3rd edition. Dr Karl Knopf
- Mosby's Ace the Boards