



# IT'S YOUR HEALTH

*This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada*

## Seniors and Aging - Osteoarthritis

### The Issue

Osteoarthritis is caused by the wearing down of cartilage in the joints of the body, causing varying degrees of pain, stiffness and swelling. A majority of Canadians will be affected by it by age 70. However, there are prevention and coping strategies that can help seniors with the disease remain active and enjoy a good quality of life.

### Background

The word 'arthritis' means joint inflammation. The term is used to describe more than 100 rheumatic diseases and conditions. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis and the one most often found in seniors. It is also one of the major conditions that leads to disability in seniors and causes them to limit their activities.

Osteoarthritis wears down cartilage, the material that cushions the ends of bones. Some studies suggest that when the joints are unable to react properly to physical stress on them, the cartilage is damaged and arthritis develops.

The joints most commonly affected by osteoarthritis are weight bearing joints, such as feet, knees, hips and spine.

Other joints, such as finger and thumb joints, may also be affected.

Up to age 55, about the same percentage of men and women have osteoarthritis, with men being slightly more vulnerable. After that age, women are more vulnerable and it affects them in different ways. In women, the disease seems to affect the hands, knees, ankles and feet, usually involving multiple joints. In men, the hips, wrists and spine are more likely to be affected.

### Symptoms of Osteoarthritis

The symptoms of osteoarthritis can include some or all of the following:

- Pain in or around a joint
- Stiffness or problems in moving a joint
- Swelling sometimes in a joint

Many people do not have any symptoms in the early stages of the disease. It often can take a long time for the disease to progress and the disease can remain stable for long periods of time.

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## Risk Factors for Osteoarthritis

Your chances of developing osteoarthritis can depend on several factors.

- **Age.** While age doesn't cause osteoarthritis, the disease affects a very large number of seniors. You can't avoid growing old, but you can improve the way your body ages by adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes physical activity.
- **Excess weight.** Many studies have pointed to a link between obesity and osteoarthritis. Excess weight puts an extra strain on weight-bearing joints, especially the knees. A recent study estimated that in about 80% of knee replacement surgeries, excess weight was a factor. A 10 - 15 lb. weight loss can reduce pain in the knees.
- **Injury and complications from other conditions.** Osteoarthritis can develop because of previous joint injuries or joint inflammation, or diseases that affect the joints, such as diabetes.

Joints can also be injured when they are repeatedly put under high impact stress for long periods of time. Some types of exercise, sports or occupations may increase your likelihood of developing osteoarthritis. For example, hand osteoarthritis is often found among boxers and elbow osteoarthritis is more common among pneumatic drill operators.

- **Heredity.** There is a genetic link in some specific forms of osteoarthritis. Some families may have a tendency for defective cartilage, while other families may

have slight defects in the way the joints fit together.

- **Lack of physical activity.** Exercise can strengthen supporting muscles and help maintain joint mobility. Often osteoarthritis sufferers avoid activity due to pain, stiffness, fatigue or fear of harming themselves. But inactivity can worsen osteoarthritis symptoms.

## Minimizing Your Risk

While you can't avoid some risk factors such as age and heredity, there are steps you can take to help prevent osteoarthritis and cope with its effects once you have it.

- Adopt a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise such as walking, cycling and swimming. This will help strengthen muscles that support the joints and keep the joints flexible.
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight. It will help reduce stress on the joints and spine, and also help prevent a number of other diseases and conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.
- Protect your joints by avoiding excess stress on them in daily life. Position yourself so that excess stress does not occur.
- Once osteoarthritis has developed, there are several devices that can help you cope, such as canes, grab bars and larger handles.
- Medication can sometimes help to reduce the pain of osteoarthritis. Talk to your doctor about getting the appropriate medication for your condition.

- Both heat and cold can help relieve osteoarthritis, depending on the symptoms. If pain is the main problem, heat will help. If swelling is the main problem, then cold will help.
- With severe, advanced osteoarthritis, surgery may be needed to relieve the effects.

## Government of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada is committed to promoting and protecting the health and well-being of Canadians. In particular, the Agency disseminates information on healthy aging and encourages seniors' health promotion, risk reduction and stabilization of chronic conditions, such as osteoarthritis.

The Public Health Agency of Canada, in collaboration with key partners, is helping to enhance national monitoring of arthritis and other rheumatic conditions.

## Need More Info?

For more information on arthritis, visit the following sites.

Public Health Agency of Canada, Musculoskeletal Diseases - Arthritis  
[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcm/topics/musc-arthritis\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcm/topics/musc-arthritis_e.html)

Public Health Agency of Canada, Arthritis Info-sheet for seniors  
[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/info\\_sheets/arthritis/arthritis\\_e.htm](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/info_sheets/arthritis/arthritis_e.htm)



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The Arthritis Society  
[www.arthritis.ca/custom%20home/default.asp?s=1](http://www.arthritis.ca/custom%20home/default.asp?s=1)

Or your local provincial/territorial Arthritis Society Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists  
[www.caot.ca](http://www.caot.ca)

Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Arthritis (IMHA)  
[www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/13217.html](http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/13217.html)

Kino Québec  
[www.kino-quebec.qc.ca](http://www.kino-quebec.qc.ca)

ALCOA, the Active Living Coalition for Older Adults  
[www.alcoa.ca/e/research\\_to\\_action.htm](http://www.alcoa.ca/e/research_to_action.htm)

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:

[www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh)  
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709  
or TTY at 1-800-267-1245\*

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