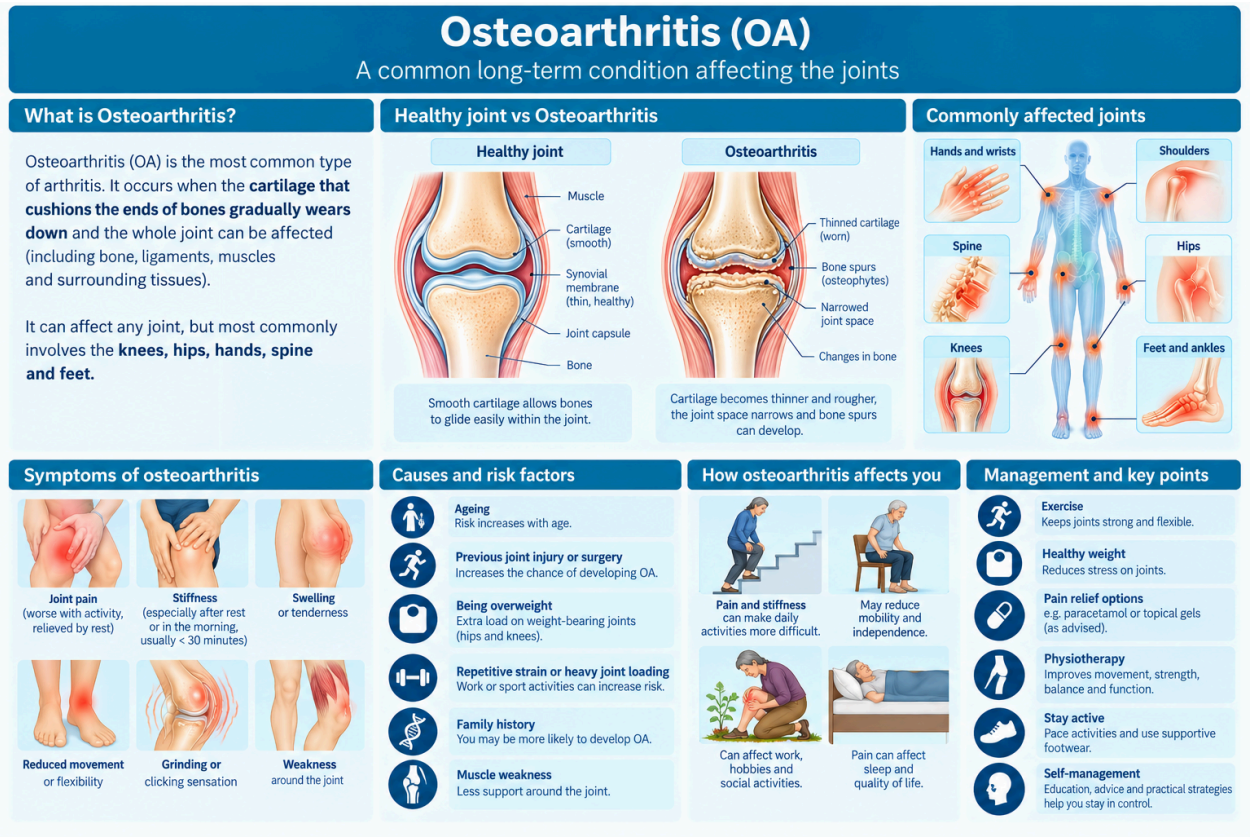
Osteoarthritis (OA)

Understanding joint pain, symptoms and management

Osteoarthritis (OA)

A guide to causes, symptoms and self-management



What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a long-term condition involving changes to cartilage, bone and other joint tissues. It commonly affects knees, hips, hands, spine and feet.

What causes osteoarthritis?

Factors include age, previous injury, repeated heavy loading, excess weight, muscle weakness and family history. OA is not simply “wear and tear”.

Symptoms and diagnosis

Recognising osteoarthritis and understanding assessment

Common symptoms

Joint pain that may worsen with activity; stiffness after rest (often under 30 minutes); reduced movement, swelling, tenderness, clicking and muscle weakness.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

A healthcare professional considers your symptoms and medical history and examines the joint. X-rays or other scans are not always needed.

How is osteoarthritis managed?

Education, self-management and regular exercise are central. Weight management, where appropriate, and pain relief may also help.

Physiotherapy

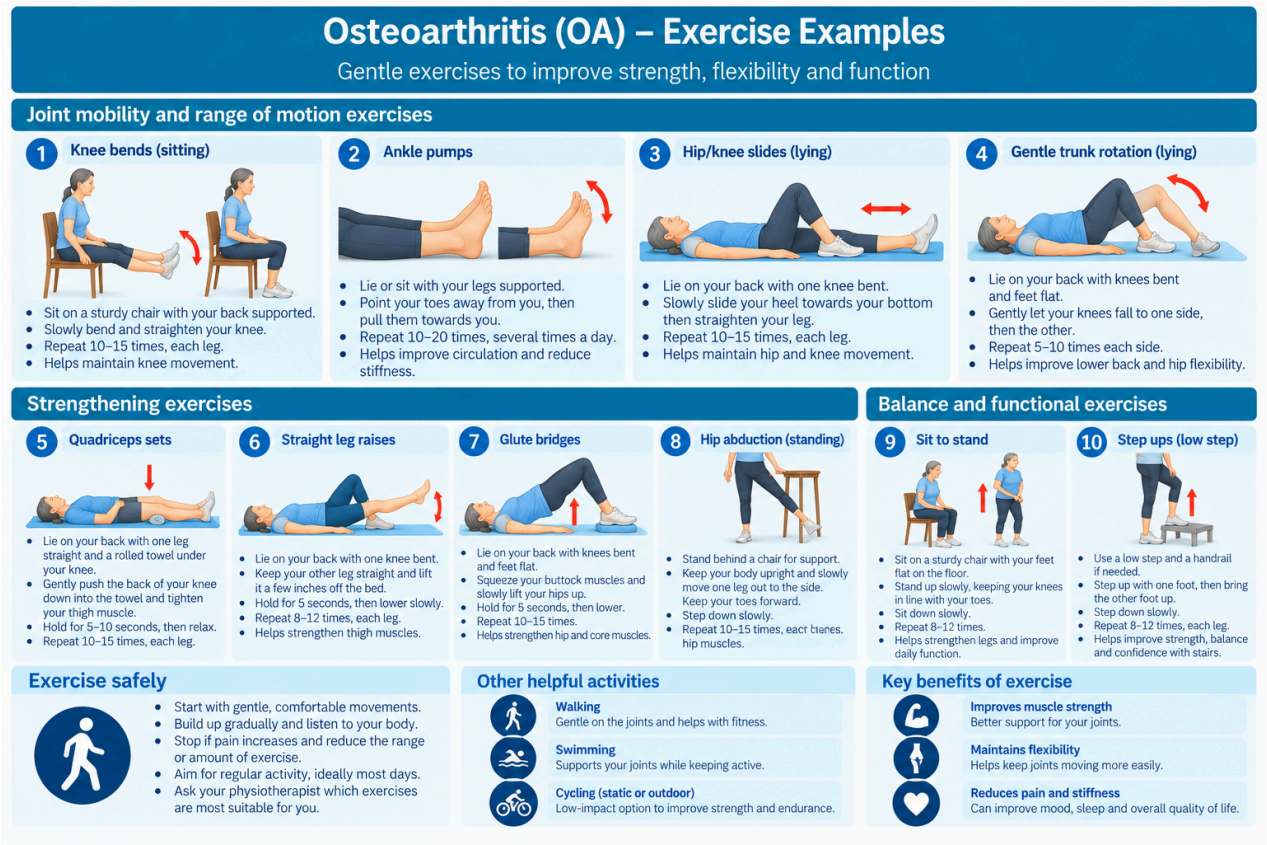
Physiotherapy can improve joint movement, strength, balance and everyday function. Your physiotherapist can tailor an exercise programme to your needs.

Living well with OA

Stay active at a comfortable level, use supportive footwear and adapt activities rather than stopping them completely.

Exercise and activity

Gentle movement and strengthening to support joint health



Exercise and activity

Strengthening, stretching, mobility work and low-impact activities such as walking, swimming or cycling can help manage symptoms and improve function.

Exercise safely

Begin gently and progress gradually. Adapt activity during flare-ups and ask your physiotherapist which exercises are suitable for you.

Treatment and when to seek help

Managing symptoms, flare-ups and next steps

Pain management

Heat or cold packs, activity pacing, breaks and joint supports (if advised) may help. Ask a clinician or pharmacist about suitable pain relief.

Self-management

Maintain a healthy weight if appropriate, stay active, wear supportive footwear and modify activities to reduce unnecessary joint strain.

Managing flare-ups

If pain or stiffness increases, temporarily reduce demanding activity, continue gentle movement and use your usual pain relief strategies.

When to seek medical advice

Contact your GP or healthcare professional if pain is worsening or uncontrolled, symptoms affect sleep or daily life, or the joint becomes very swollen, red or hot.

Key points to remember

Osteoarthritis is common and manageable. Exercise is a key treatment, and physiotherapy can help you stay active and improve function.

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