Living with Osteoarthritis

Understanding joint pain, movement and self-management

Living with Osteoarthritis

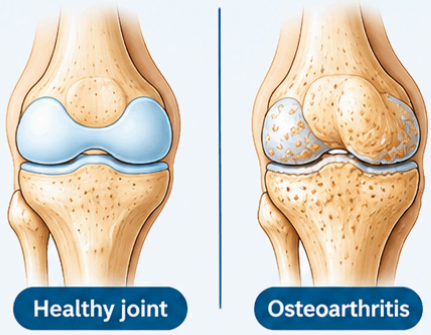
A guide to symptoms, exercise and living well

Living with Osteoarthritis

Manage symptoms, stay active and maintain your independence

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis. It occurs when the cartilage in a joint gradually wears away, leading to pain, stiffness and reduced movement.



Common symptoms

Symptoms can vary and may change over time.

- Joint pain, especially with movement
- Stiffness, particularly in the morning or after resting
- Swelling around the joint
- Reduced movement or flexibility
- Grinding or cracking sensations
- Weakness in the muscles around the joint

What causes osteoarthritis?

Several factors can contribute:

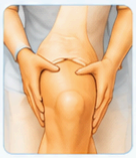
- Ageing
- Previous joint injury or surgery
- Repetitive strain or heavy physical work
- Being overweight or obese
- Family history of osteoarthritis
- Weak muscles around the joint

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually based on:



Your symptoms and how they affect daily life



Physical examination of the joint



X-rays (sometimes used)

Scans and blood tests are not routinely needed unless another condition is suspected.

Managing osteoarthritis

There is no cure, but many people manage symptoms well.

- **Exercise & activity** — Keep moving with low-impact exercises like walking or swimming.
- **Weight management** — Losing weight can reduce joint load and ease pain.
- **Pain relief** — Paracetamol or other medicines (if advised).
- **Joint protection** — Use supportive footwear and avoid high-impact activities.
- **Heat and cold** — Heat can ease stiffness; cold can reduce swelling.

Living well with osteoarthritis

- **Stay active:** regular exercise helps keep joints mobile and muscles strong.
- **Pace yourself:** balance activity with rest, and avoid overdoing it.
- **Use aids:** walking sticks, handrails or supportive shoes if needed.
- **Eat well:** a balanced diet supports bone and joint health.
- **Keep a positive outlook:** many people lead full and active lives with OA.

When should I seek further help?

Contact your GP or physiotherapist if:

- Pain is worsening despite treatment
- You have significant difficulty with daily life
- A joint becomes very swollen, hot or red

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a long-term condition affecting joints, causing pain, stiffness and reduced movement. It commonly affects knees, hips, hands, spine and feet.

What happens in the joint?

The smooth cartilage covering bone ends becomes thinner and rougher. Movement may feel less easy, and surrounding tissues can become irritated.

Symptoms, causes and diagnosis

Recognising osteoarthritis and understanding assessment

1. Common symptoms

Joint pain with activity; morning or after-rest stiffness; swelling; reduced movement; grinding or cracking; and weakness around the joint. Symptoms can flare up.

2. Contributing factors

Ageing, previous joint injury or surgery, repetitive strain, higher body weight, family history and weakness around the joint can contribute.

3. How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Diagnosis usually involves discussing symptoms and examining the joint. X-rays are sometimes used; scans and blood tests are not routinely needed.

4. Everyday movement

Osteoarthritis is not simply wear and tear. Everyday activity does not necessarily damage your joints, and appropriately paced exercise is beneficial.

5. Important information

Speak to a clinician if a joint becomes very swollen, hot or red, or if pain or function deteriorates significantly.

Exercise and self-management

Practical ways to improve comfort and mobility

Osteoarthritis exercise examples

Gentle movements to support joint mobility, strength and confidence.

Living with Osteoarthritis – Exercise Examples

Gentle exercises to help reduce pain, improve movement and keep joints strong

1 Knee range of movement (heel slide)



- Lie on your back with one leg straight and the other bent.
- Slide your heel towards your buttock, keeping your heel on the floor.
- Go as far as comfortable, then slowly straighten your leg.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

2 Quadriceps strengthening (quad sets)



- Lie on your back with a rolled towel under your knee.
- Push the back of your knee down into the towel, tightening your thigh muscle.
- Hold for 5–10 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

3 Hip abduction (side leg raise)



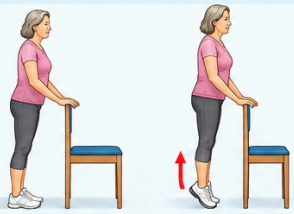
- Lie on your side with the bottom leg bent for support.
- Keep your top leg straight and lift it up to the side, keeping your toes pointing forwards.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

4 Sit to stand (chair exercise)



- Sit on a sturdy chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Lean forward slightly and stand up, using your legs (not your hands if possible).
- Slowly lower back down in a controlled way.
- Repeat 8–12 times.

5 Heel raises (calf strengthening)



- Stand behind a sturdy chair or worktop for balance.
- Slowly rise up onto your tiptoes.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds.
- Lower down slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

6 Gentle stretch (hamstring stretch)



- Sit on the floor or a firm surface with one leg straight and the other bent.
- Gently reach towards your toes, keeping your back straight.
- Hold for 15–30 seconds.
- Repeat 2–3 times, each leg.

Rehabilitation and progression

Start with comfortable movements and increase activity gradually as tolerated.
Strengthening, walking and other low-impact activities can support joint health.
A physiotherapist can adapt exercises to your symptoms and abilities.

Exercise safely

Use a comfortable range of movement and avoid forcing painful positions.
Reduce intensity if pain or swelling increases; seek advice if symptoms persist.
Choose repetitions and frequency with your physiotherapist when needed.

Living well and next steps

Staying active and knowing when to seek support

1. Living well with osteoarthritis

Many people live full, active lives with osteoarthritis. Keep moving, pace activities and maintain your confidence and independence.

2. Physiotherapy and support

A physiotherapist can advise on suitable exercise, joint protection, strengthening and gradual activity progression.

3. Do I need surgery?

Most people do not need surgery. Joint replacement may be considered for severe symptoms that have not improved with non-surgical treatment.

4. Key messages

Osteoarthritis is common and manageable. Exercise is safe and beneficial for joints, and pain does not always mean harm.

When to seek further help

Contact your GP or physiotherapist if pain worsens despite treatment, daily activities become difficult, a joint is very swollen, hot or red, or you are unsure how to exercise safely.

B-Well Physiotherapy Services

0300 303 4811

bwell.mskberkshire@nhs.net

www.bwellberkshire.co.uk