

Your Guide to Knee Osteoarthritis: What It Is and How to Feel Better

Wondering if your knee pain is arthritis? Learn what knee osteoarthritis is, common symptoms, and treatments that can help you feel better.

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Knee osteoarthritis can be a major pain (literally) that limits the ability to complete our daily activities. Walking our dog, going up and down stairs, squatting low to get that iron skillet out of the kitchen cabinet—these are all activities we can be limited in.

Our bodies naturally take the path of least resistance. We're wired to protect ourselves, so when a movement feels painful, we instinctively adjust to avoid it. Maybe it hurts to go downstairs leading with your left leg, so you always lead with your right instead.

That strategy can work for a while, but if the underlying injury is not addressed, it will continue to worsen until you have no choice but to address it.

So let's dive into what knee osteoarthritis is, how it develops, common symptoms, and what you can do to manage knee arthritis pain.

What is Knee Osteoarthritis?

Knee osteoarthritis is the breakdown of the hard and soft structures that come together to make the knee joint. This includes the ends of the bones and cartilage, which is a shock-absorbing tissue that provides cushioning for the joint.

We place repetitive stress on our knees doing everyday activities like walking, running, and squatting. For that reason, the knee is one of the most common joints to develop osteoarthritis.

Osteoarthritis can come about in two ways:

- **Primary osteoarthritis:** Often called *knee arthritis*, this is the most common form and occurs through natural wear and tear of the joint over time.
 - **Secondary osteoarthritis:** A less common type that results from an underlying medical condition or trauma.
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Who is Most Likely to Develop Knee Arthritis?

Knee osteoarthritis can develop in anyone at any age, but a few factors can increase your risk of knee arthritis.

- **Older adults, especially women**
 - Research shows that in individuals over 60 years old, 13% of women and 10% of men are likely to get knee arthritis.
 - **Individuals with higher body weight**
 - The increased stress on the joints can put those with higher body weight at greater risk of knee arthritis.
 - **Individuals with characteristics of metabolic syndrome**
 - High blood pressure, blood sugar, or cholesterol can cause inflammation and joint changes that lead to knee arthritis.
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Common Symptoms of Knee Osteoarthritis

Knee osteoarthritis can present in different ways for each individual. It is normal to experience a combination of the following knee arthritis symptoms:

- Inflammation around the knee joint, including swelling, warmth, and redness.
 - Morning stiffness, especially when getting up and moving.
 - Pain after periods of inactivity.
 - Discomfort after long periods of weight-bearing activities, like walking or standing.
 - Pain when going up or down stairs (often worse going down).
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How Do I Know If I Have Knee Arthritis?

Knee osteoarthritis is typically diagnosed with x-ray imaging, performed by your primary care doctor or an orthopedic specialist.

On the x-ray, signs of knee arthritis may include:

- Narrowing of knee joint space.
- Subchondral sclerosis (hardening of soft tissue structures).

- Bony spurs (small pieces of bone that form around the joint).
 - Subchondral cysts (fluid-filled sacs).
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Do I Need to Worry If I Have Knee Osteoarthritis But No Symptoms?

Good news: Not necessarily.

Let's say you get a knee x-ray for an unrelated issue, and it shows signs of arthritis, but your knee feels fine.

This situation is common. Research shows that only about *15% of people with x-ray evidence of knee arthritis actually experience symptoms*.

If you have no symptoms or mobility limitations, you likely don't need treatment yet. Still, osteoarthritis progresses slowly over time, so keep an eye out for any changes.

How to Treat Your Knee Osteoarthritis at Home

If you're experiencing symptoms, here are a few evidence-based ways to manage knee arthritis pain at home.

1. Ice pack

Ice helps calm inflammation so your knee can move more freely.

Wrap an ice pack in a towel and apply it to your knee for 15–20 minutes. Repeat up to three times a day, especially after higher-level activity.

2. Knee brace

A soft knee brace or sleeve can help reduce swelling and improve stability, allowing for overall safer movement with less pain.

Note: The fitting of the brace is important. The right fit will not restrict but rather offer support for your knee *throughout* your movement. Try wearing it throughout your daily activities, and if it's too loose or too tight, reconsider the size or style.

3. Over-the-counter (OTC) medication

There are a few OTC medications that can help ease symptoms of knee osteoarthritis. As always, follow the directions on the labels and consult your pharmacist or doctor for any questions.

- Ibuprofen or naproxen can help reduce inflammation.
- Acetaminophen can help with pain (though it does not directly reduce inflammation).
- Diclofenac gel can provide localized anti-inflammatory relief and can be a good alternative for pills.

4. Low-impact exercises

Switching to low-impact activities, such as swimming, water aerobics, or biking, can reduce impact on the joints while keeping you active.

How Your Health Team Can Help

If your symptoms are severe or not improving with self-management, consult your primary care doctor or an orthopedic specialist.

Your doctor may recommend one of the following treatment options:

1. Physical Therapy

Physical therapy is proven to be one of the most effective tools to manage knee osteoarthritis.

Although many individuals come to physical therapy with a diagnosis of knee osteoarthritis, not every person's care will look the same. Through a series of thorough tests and measures, your physical therapist will create a plan of care to treat your specific needs.

Physical therapy can help:

- Improve mobility and reduce stiffness.
- Strengthen muscles around your knee and hip.
- Improve stability and balance.
- Support a safe return to your desired activities.
- Provide knee arthritis education and home management strategies.

2. Corticosteroid injection

A corticosteroid injection, also known as a cortisone shot, can help reduce pain and inflammation for knee arthritis. Your doctor can determine if this treatment is right for you and can provide the injection during a follow-up visit.

3. Weight management

Weight management can be a beneficial treatment option for those with symptomatic arthritis and a BMI greater than 25. Reducing weight through diet control and low-impact aerobic exercise can ease the stress on weight-bearing joints like the knees.

4. Surgery

You may be wondering, “*Do I need surgery for knee osteoarthritis?*”

Surgical options, most commonly a total knee replacement (TKA), are usually recommended for people with advanced knee osteoarthritis or those who haven’t improved with non-surgical options.

While surgery can feel like a big step, many individuals report improvements in pain and a return to their daily activities afterward. Your healthcare team will provide education throughout your care to help determine if, and when, surgery is the best option for you.

When to Seek Care

If your knee pain is limiting your daily life, worsening over time, or preventing you from staying active, it’s a good idea to reach out to your primary care provider or an orthopedic specialist.

Get Help Today

Early support and treatment can make a big difference in your long-term health.

Click [here](#) to get started.