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Patient information: Arthritis (Beyond the Basics)

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ARTHRITIS OVERVIEW

Arthritis refers to inflammation of a joint. The inflammation can affect any of the important structures inside a joint, including the joint lining (synovium), bones, cartilage, or supporting tissues. Common symptoms of arthritis include pain, stiffness, and swelling of the joint. The condition may affect one or several joints throughout the body.

There are many possible causes of arthritis, although some are much more common than others. Some types of arthritis respond well to treatment and resolve without any lingering effects, whereas other types of arthritis are more difficult to control and can be disabling.

This topic provides an overview of arthritis; more detailed information about the various types of arthritis is also available.

ARTHRITIS CAUSES

There are many possible causes of arthritis, including age-related wear and tear, infections, autoimmune conditions, injuries, and others. Topic reviews that discuss specific types of arthritis are available separately. (See ['Where to get more information'](#) below.)

ARTHRITIS SYMPTOMS

Joint symptoms — The most common symptoms of arthritis include joint pain and stiffness. There may also be joint tenderness, swelling, and limited movement of one or more joints. The skin over the joint is sometimes red and warm.

There are two main types of arthritis: inflammatory and noninflammatory. Examples of inflammatory arthritis include infectious arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and gout. An example of noninflammatory arthritis is osteoarthritis, the most common type of arthritis. The location, timing, and pattern of joint pain, as well as the presence of swelling and symptoms outside the joint (such as rash), can help to distinguish between inflammatory and noninflammatory arthritis.

Inflammatory arthritis — Inflammatory arthritis usually causes joint stiffness with rest, especially morning stiffness. Certain types of inflammatory arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis and the arthritis of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), affect joints symmetrically (ie, affect the same joints on both sides of the body).

Noninflammatory arthritis — Noninflammatory arthritis usually causes pain that is aggravated by movement and weight-bearing and is relieved by rest. Joints on one or both sides of the body may be affected.

ARTHRITIS DIAGNOSIS

The process of diagnosing arthritis involves several steps. A medical history and physical examination usually provide the most helpful information; laboratory tests, imaging tests (such as x-rays), and other tests are sometimes needed.

Laboratory and imaging tests — Laboratory and imaging tests are sometimes, but not always, needed to determine the cause of arthritis.

Blood tests may be recommended. For example, if rheumatoid arthritis or SLE is suspected, it can be helpful to test the blood for autoantibodies that are commonly present in these diseases. Examples include the rheumatoid factor (RF) for rheumatoid arthritis and the antinuclear antibody (ANA) for SLE.

Testing of the fluid inside a joint, called the synovial fluid, is often helpful in determining the cause of a person's arthritis. After making the skin numb, the fluid is removed by inserting a needle inside the joint and withdrawing a sample of fluid. This procedure is sometimes called a "joint tap." Analysis of the joint fluid is particularly helpful in confirming that the arthritis is inflammatory and in establishing a diagnosis of septic arthritis (due to bacterial infection), gout, or pseudogout.

X-rays provide detailed pictures of bones. Other imaging tests, such as ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and computer aided tomography (CT scan) provide images of the tissues inside and surrounding the joints. One or more of these imaging tests may be recommended to detect erosions (bone damage due to arthritis), fractures, calcium deposits, or changes in the shape of a joint.

For many types of arthritis, changes in the joint are not visible on x-ray for months or even years. However, x-rays are often useful to monitor over time.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Some signs and symptoms of arthritis require urgent medical care. If you have one or more swollen joints and any of the following, you should seek medical care as soon as possible.

- Fever
- Weight loss
- An inability to function due to joint pain
- An overall sense of feeling ill
- Sudden weakness of specific muscle groups or
- Burning pain, numbness, or a pins-and-needles sensation

ARTHRITIS TREATMENT

The treatment of arthritis depends upon the specific cause. (See "[Patient information: Osteoarthritis treatment \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)" and "[Patient information: Rheumatoid arthritis treatment \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".) Common treatments include physical and occupational therapy, pain relievers (such as acetaminophen), antiinflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen), and medications that suppress the immune system (such as prednisone or methotrexate).

