

# OSTEOARTHRITIS

By Dr Nicole Lim



## What is osteoarthritis and how does it occur?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the commonest form of arthritis in the UK. Although it can affect any joint in the body, it most commonly affect the knees, hips and the small joints in the hands. It develops when there is severe wear and tear to the joints and its surrounding structures. There are several factors that are thought to increase your risk of developing OA:

- Age – it is more common with increasing age
- Genetics – OA may run in the family
- Obesity – extra strain on the hip and knee joints makes OA more likely
- Gender – it is more common in women than in men
- Previous joint injury, damage or deformity such as joint infection, fracture or ligament injury
- Occupation – joint overuse in certain occupations increases the risk of developing OA

## What are the symptoms of osteoarthritis?

OA commonly causes joint pain and stiffness. You may also notice limited range of movements of the affected joint. Joints may appear swollen or more “knobbly” than usual. If severe, it can affect your mobility and other activities of daily living such as putting on socks and shoes, using the can opener or doing buttons on your clothes.

## What are the treatment options for osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a long term condition and once diagnosed, the mainstay of treatment for OA are pain control through lifestyle measures, medication and/or surgery.

Regular exercise can help ease your symptoms by keeping you active, strengthen your joints and build up muscles. Additionally, it can improve your posture, relieve stress and help with weight loss. Your GP receptionist can refer you to a physiotherapist who can provide advice and an exercise plan to follow at home. Alternatively you can use a self referral form available on the practice website under the ‘Community Support Services’ tab.

If you are overweight or obese, it often makes OA worse due to excess strain on some of your joints. You can try losing weight by doing more physical activity and eating a healthier diet. If you require further support to lose weight or advice on diet, you can make a referral to **Be Well Tameside** using a self referral form on their website ([www.penninecare.nhs.uk/bewelltameside](http://www.penninecare.nhs.uk/bewelltameside)) or ring 0161 716 2000.

There are various types of pain relief medications available that your GP can recommend to you, depending on the severity of your pain and your medical history.

- Paracetamol. You can buy this over the counter and we recommend taking this regularly to start with.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, aspirin and diclofenac. They are available as creams (topical), tablets or capsules. These medications help by reducing inflammation. Topical NSAIDs are particularly effective if you have OA in your knees or hands. If you have certain medical conditions such as asthma, stomach ulcers, stroke, or heart attack, NSAIDs may not be suitable for you. Please discuss with your GP if you are unsure.
- Opioids such as codeine or co-codamol. These may be suitable if paracetamol and/or NSAIDs have not helped. Low strength co-codamol (8/500) can be purchased over the counter. Please be aware that it can cause drowsiness, nausea, constipation and be potentially addictive. Due to its possible side effects, it is carefully considered in elderly patients.
- Capsaicin cream. This can be an alternative to topical NSAIDs if you have osteoarthritis in your hands or knees. It works by blocking the nerves that send pain messages to the treated area. It may take up to a month for you to notice a difference to your pain.

Steroid injections are sometimes used to treat painful musculoskeletal problems. When treatment with conservative measures and pain relief haven't helped, you may be offered steroid injections into the affected joint. They can work quickly to ease pain for weeks or months.

Surgery may be offered when there is severe damage to the joint. It can improve your symptoms, mobility and quality of life. If surgery is thought to be appropriate, your GP can refer you to an orthopaedic surgeon.

#### **Sources and useful links**

[www.versusarthritis.org](http://www.versusarthritis.org)

[www.arthritisaction.org.uk](http://www.arthritisaction.org.uk)

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/osteoarthritis](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/osteoarthritis)

[www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/conditions-illnesses/arthritis/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/conditions-illnesses/arthritis/)