Everything You Need to Know About Osteoarthritis

by SUSAN CASSIDY

What Is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is one of the most common forms of arthritis diagnosed in the United States each year. Considered the “wear and tear” type of arthritis, is it most commonly diagnosed in older adults, although anyone at any age can develop OA.

Arthritis is an inflammatory disease under which numerous specific conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, lupus or gout are categorized. These conditions are considered autoimmune disorders because your immune system is in overdrive, fighting against itself.

The hallmark characteristic of osteoarthritis is that it breaks down your cartilage. Cartilage is the flexible, yet supportive material that cushions your bones from rubbing together. Osteoarthritis destroys cartilage, and once it’s gone, it’s gone forever. Without that cushion between your bones, pain is the biggest complaint, with joint stiffness and muscle fatigue close behind.

Different kind of autoimmune disorders requires different types of treatment. Before you make any changes to alleviate your osteoarthritis symptoms, you’ll want to make sure you have the most accurate information from your doctors.

It is also wise to get a second opinion if you have the opportunity. Even if you have one kind of arthritis, it doesn’t mean you aren’t dealing with another one.

How Do You Get Osteoarthritis?

There are several factors that can play a role in developing osteoarthritis:

Genetics

If it runs in your family, you have a higher risk of developing OA, although it’s not a guarantee. Knowing your family’s medical history can be helpful if you are experiencing osteoarthritis symptoms. It can also help pinpoint a diagnosis faster.

Injury

If you suffer an injury either from overuse or an accidental break, osteoarthritis can develop around the injury, breaking down that much-needed cartilage. Professional athletes are more often at risk for developing osteoarthritis later in life because of the increased risk of injury.

Being Overweight

Carrying too much weight can add stress to your bones and joints, leading to inflammation. Inflammation is only helpful when you are trying to fight off an infection.

Reducing any excess weight will help ease arthritis symptoms. I have yet to master this particular goal, but I keep trying! If you have been experiencing constant, achy pain that impacts how well you perform your everyday tasks, it may be time for a conversation with your doctor.

You may also experience other symptoms like a low-grade fever, fatigue, and joint stiffness.

Age

Since cartilage breaks down as we age, osteoarthritis is more likely a diagnosis the older you are. That being said, children and young adults can certainly develop any kind of arthritis. It just may take longer to get an accurate diagnosis since this type of arthritis is more unusual in younger people.

Obtaining an Osteoarthritis Diagnosis

Pain is usually the first indicator that you have any kind of problem. Arthritis pain is a consistent, often dull ache that feels worse in the morning when you first wake up.

It's not like a sharp pain you get from an injury. You may even write it off as just the aches and pains of getting older.

Sometimes you discover you have osteoarthritis when the cartilage damage appears on an X-ray for another injury. I discovered I had osteoarthritis in my knee when I was seeking relief from a torn meniscus, and spinal arthritis when I had pain in my hip.

A diagnosis of osteoarthritis is clear-cut when X-rays are part of the diagnostic process. Your doctor may also run bloodwork to eliminate other conditions. The process of getting this diagnosis can take a long time, however, because aches and pains are hard to pinpoint.

Pain can radiate out from one area of your body but the OA damage could be happening someplace else. Try to stay as patient as you can during the process, and utilize some pain management and stress relief techniques to help you through.

Next page: More information on obtaining an osteoarthritis diagnosis, osteoarthritis pain management tips, and everyday living with osteoarthritis tips.

Obtaining an Osteoarthritis Diagnosis

Coordination is the Name of the Game

Each doctor you work with is going to approach your care from their level of expertise. This is a huge plus because you obviously want them to be an expert in their field. The drawback comes when you are given a treatment suggestion or a diagnosis, your appointment is over, and you head home. Figuring out the next steps can feel overwhelming if you don't know where to turn.

Try to find at least one doctor that gives you their time and answers your questions. I've found that my general practitioner and rheumatologist both fit the bill beautifully. Keeping a regular appointment with the same doctors can help track your symptoms and identify areas of concern. If you feel like your visits are too rushed, ask for the first appointment of the day or call back with your questions.

Ideally, your doctors will also communicate with each other when necessary, but that isn't always possible. You'll want to find a system to organize your medical records, medications, symptoms, and progress. You can create

your own in a journal or use an app like Track & React, to help you stay organized.

Osteoarthritis Pain Management Made Simple

The majority of treatments for osteoarthritis are sought for the primary goal of relieving pain. Joint stiffness is a close second, and there are numerous ways to approach both of these symptoms. Don't feel as though you have to try all of them at once! Pick one or two that work quickly for you and then you can explore others as your treatment progresses. You may also

find that some treatments lose their effectiveness over time and that will be the indicator it's time to try something new.

Depending on your individual health needs, pain management can include any combination of the following:

- **Over-the-counter pain relievers**, like aspirin or Tylenol. These can be helpful to manage daily symptoms. Just be sure to get a definitive diagnosis, so other pain conditions or health issues can be ruled out.
- **Prescription osteoarthritis medications.** If you feel like you're taking Tylenol like tic tacs and it's not doing the job anymore, talk to your doctor about a prescription strength anti-inflammatory or pain relief medication that focuses on treating osteoarthritis symptoms. You will have to keep regular appointments so you can keep track of your progress, and some medications can leave you with unwanted side effects so just be sure to get all the information before making a decision.
- **Physical therapy, including hot or cold therapy.** When pain, stiffness, and fatigue are keeping you from being active, you will need to push yourself to stay as physical as you can. Stretching, swimming, light yoga or walking boosts your mood, aids in flexibility and motion, and helps manage your weight.
- **Acupuncture.** Managing chronic pain can make the rest of you tighten up and not feel very relaxed. Acupuncture has been known to help relieve pain and stiffness from OA symptoms as well as manage stress or anxiety. Even if one strategy doesn't work 100 percent, when you combine a few it can really make a difference.
- **Massage.** Depending on your pain level, light massage can be a great way to relax and relieve sore muscles. You'll want to work with someone who is experienced in massaging people with pain conditions, so ask your doctor or rheumatologist for recommendations.
- **Stress management.** If you already have a system for managing stress, keep it up! If not, you will need to put one in place and sooner rather than later. We'll talk about this later, but dealing with chronic pain adds a whole new level to stress management that you will need to tackle. Not to worry! There are lots of resources to help you out.
- **Joint injections.** After you have tried various pain management strategies for some time, you may become an eligible patient for joint injections. Your doctor will administer medicine (usually a pain reliever and/or a steroid for anti-inflammatory support) directly into the inflamed joint. This is an outpatient procedure that can give you up to months of pain relief.
- **Joint replacement or surgery.** Working with your orthopedic surgeon and rheumatologist will help you determine if you are a good candidate for any kind of replacement or surgical procedures.

Everyday Tips and Tricks for Living With Osteoarthritis

After you have done all you can to treat your arthritis from a medical standpoint, there are simple modifications you can make to your daily routine to help promote flexibility, reduce pain and strengthen muscles. You are probably already making daily decisions to accommodate your arthritis symptoms, even if you're not aware of it.

For example, I hadn't noticed I was avoiding certain activities because I knew I couldn't manage all the walking that would be involved, like shopping at the mall.

Since osteoarthritis is exacerbated by repetitive motion and overuse, you may want to switch up activities that you do the most to give those muscles a break.

For example, if typing is a big part of your job and you have OA in your hands, see if you can use a dictation system to cut down on the time you spend on the keyboard. If you are sitting for long stretches of time, stand up and bend, stretch, or take a short walk as often as possible to help reduce stiffness. Ask your doctor for specific recommendations or you can work with a physical therapist to tailor a program for you.

You will need to conserve your energy as much as you can, since doing things with limited mobility can take twice as long and leave you feeling exhausted. You may want to consider delegating tasks or asking for help.

Many people find that asking for help or making certain accommodations a stressful task, and I was no different. You will need to decide for yourself what you can do to make your daily life more successful without allowing the stress to overtake you. Which brings us to arthritis and depression.

Next page: More everyday tips for living with osteoarthritis including mental health and diet, and putting it all together about what is osteoarthritis.

Everyday Tips and Tricks for Living With Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis and Depression

Managing any kind of chronic condition can be incredibly stressful on you, your family and friends, and your job. Arthritis is no exception.

All the well-meaning suggestions from friends and family may not be enough to combat the anxiety and depression you could find yourself faced with. Lack of sleep alone is enough to make anyone irritable, but add on chronic pain, job stress, relationship issues, or money problems and it brings the meaning of the word stress to a whole new level.

Taking care of your emotional health needs to become a priority if it isn't already. Adjusting to life with osteoarthritis can feel very overwhelming, and it's not as if your life was problem free before your diagnosis.

Arthritis happens when you're trying to parent a teenager, maintain your job or navigate through personal relationships. It can also leave you with a sense of grief for a time when you were able to do things you're no longer able to.

Carve out a small time every day to devote to stress relief. I know it may seem like you don't have any to spare, but if you don't take the time, you may find yourself in a worse position. For example, if I just power through when I know it's too much, I will be exhausted for days. The conditions will never be perfect, just jump in and try something to lighten your spirit.

- Connect to a support group, either online or in person. It doesn't necessarily need to be about managing health conditions, but it is a relief to talk to someone who really understands what you're going through.
- Become a member of a spiritual community. Focusing on other people and what they may be going through can help keep you from feeling isolated.
- Rekindle a childhood hobby that brought you joy.
- Learn something new, like an instrument or another language. Keeping your mind occupied on something you enjoy will give you a rest from remembering how challenging it is to live with OA.

Osteoarthritis and Nutrition

Even if your diagnosis does not reflect an issue with inflammation, it doesn't necessarily mean you are inflammation free. While osteoarthritis is not an inflammatory type of arthritis, you can still suffer from inflammatory symptoms.

Inflammatory conditions can impact your ability to properly digest the food you're eating. Before you make any

changes to your diet, you will definitely want to discuss it with your doctor so your vitamin levels can be monitored regularly.

If you have an unknown or untreated food sensitivity or allergy, you could be introducing an allergen into your system, which in turn triggers inflammation. If you are experiencing symptoms of a food sensitivity or allergy, like stomach upset, rashes or hives, be sure to share that information with your doctor and do everything you can to limit your exposure to that food.

Numerous reports have pointed to a connection between sugar, processed foods, and inflammation. Since nutritional science changes as we learn more, not to mention that people choose food for various health and cultural reasons, I don't necessarily recommend shunning an entire type of food. That being said, when you're battling pain 24/7, there are some days where the burger just won't cut it and other days where I'm too tired to do anything else. Keep striving for balance and try to pay attention to your symptoms to learn what your body needs.

Maintaining good nutrition helps with overall health as we know. When you are managing OA, don't make your body work harder than it has to. The extra weight adds unnecessary strain to your joints and muscles. Small dietary changes throughout the day can really add up!

There has been some research that points to certain foods and spices being especially helpful in easing inflammation, like cherries and turmeric. Remember, your body will tell you what is working and what isn't. Track your symptoms as well as your diet and work with your own doctor for the best results for you.

Putting It All Together

Learning to live with osteoarthritis is a process. By examining the various ways your life is impacted by osteoarthritis, you'll be able to find changes to make it

easier on your body and your soul. Some days it will work better than others, but just keep going and try not to get discouraged or overwhelmed.

At my last rheumatologist visit, we were reviewing how things were going since I began joint injection therapy about six months ago. I was very happy with the success of the treatment, but the procedures themselves are time-consuming and uncomfortable. However, I miss time from work, time from my family.

I basically said to him, "So this is it? I have to do these shots every five or six months or whenever I need them....indefinitely"' and he said, "Well, you may become eligible for surgery at some point, but for now, yeah." I sighed, 'That just sucks." He answered, "I get that a lot."

I've been managing osteoarthritis for ten years now, and I still walked out of that visit feeling as overwhelmed as I did when I first heard the diagnosis. I changed my schedule for the day, took some time to rest and reflect, and will try again tomorrow. So will you.

There will be times when communication will feel more stressful because of everything you're dealing with, so don't be afraid to seek professional help or support if you need it. Reach out to support sites online for new ideas, stories, and reassurances that you are not alone.