



# ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION

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## UNDERSTANDING ARTHRITIS

This information leaflet is published by the Arthritis Foundation as part  
of our continuing education  
Programme for all people with arthritis.



The Bone and Joint Decade is a global campaign to improve the quality of life for people with musculoskeletal conditions and to advance understanding treatment of those conditions through research, prevention and education.

## WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

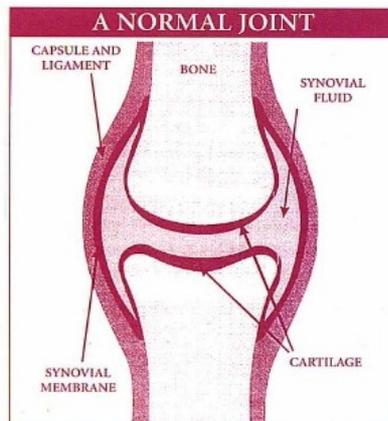
Most of us will experience pain in or around a joint at some time. The pain is often due to some minor injury, sprain or overuse of a joint. The pain usually lasts from a few hours to a few days and then settles completely, but other pains may be due to a form of arthritis which could be serious if not treated early before permanent damage is done to joints.

RHEUMATISM is a general term which is used to describe aches and pains in or around a joint. It may be due to some abnormality in the tissue around the joint such as the muscles, tendons and ligaments.

ARTHRITIS means inflammation of the joints. In many patients (eg.rheumatoid arthritis) there is marked inflammation of the joints with pain, swelling and limitation of movement but there is little or no swelling of the joint (eg. Osteoarthritis).

## HOW DO JOINTS WORK?

A JOINT is a part of the body where one bone moves to another bone. The two bones are held together by ligaments. LIGAMENTS are like elastic bands -they keep the bones in place while muscles lengthen and shorten to make the joint move. At the end of the bones there is a layer of CARTILAGE which covers the surface of the bone. The cartilage is present inside the joint. It prevents the bones from directly rubbing against each other and acts as a shock absorber. As a result the joint is able to work smoothly.



*What goes wrong with joints varies from one kind of arthritis to another*

The space within the joint is the JOINT CAVITY which contains SYNOVIAL FLUID. The lining of the joint cavity is called the SYNOVIUM, which produces the SYNOVIAL FLUID. This fluid lubricates the joint and provides nutrients to the joint and the cartilage. The outer layer of the joint is called the CAPSULE.

Around the joints we have MUSCLES. The ends of the muscles become smaller and form TENDONS which are the part of the muscles inserted into the bone.

Movement of a joint takes place when the muscle contracts and pulls on the tendon and moves the two bones towards or away from each other.

#### ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ARTHRITIS?

In some forms of arthritis the cause is known, e.g. gout or an arthritis that follows an infection such as diarrhoea or sexually transmitted infections. In other cases such as rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis, the cause is not known; therefore, it is not possible to cure the disease. It is possible to control or slow down damage to the joints with drugs known as DMARDs (Disease Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs) prescribed by your doctor. Special exercises are an important part of the treatment too.

#### WHO GETS ARTHRITIS?

ARTHRITIS affects people of all ages -even children! It is true that some types of arthritis, e.g. osteoarthritis, are more common in older people. However, there are other kinds of arthritis common to both young men and women. There are some forms of arthritis that are more common in women (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis) whilst others are more common in men (e.g. gout). Arthritis can affect anyone - some types of arthritis occur even when there is no other family member with arthritis. There are other forms that occur more often in family members of patients with arthritis.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TREAT ARTHRITIS?

The treatment of ARTHRITIS will depend on the cause of the arthritis and may include the following:

##### a) General Measures

- 1) General measures such as reducing weight, exercises to strengthen muscles, avoiding alcohol and certain foods (eg. gout)
- 2) The use of a splint, brace, knee or ankle guard, walking stick, crutches and other assistive devices helps some patients, depending on which joints are involved and the severity of the joint damage.

b) Medication:

1) Analgesics or pain tablets can be used to provide some relief of pain.

2) Anti-inflammatory drugs are of value in helping to reduce the stiffness, the swelling of the joints and the pain.

3) DMARDs can be used to prevent repeated episodes of pain and swelling of the joints in certain types of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis.

4) Specific treatments are available -if the cause of arthritis is known eg. Gout or infections, then it is possible to use specific treatments to control the arthritis.

c) Surgery:

If a patient already has severe damage to a joint, it may be necessary to have an operation to relieve pain, improve the function and help prevent further damage to a joint.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE ARTHRITIS?

One of the first steps is to determine whether your symptoms are due to ARTHRITIS or RHEUMATISM. You should visit your nearest primary health care centre, clinic, family doctor or hospital.

Depending on the findings on examination, you will be advised what you should do and may also be given some medication. If your illness is more severe then you may require blood tests and or x-rays, or you may be referred to a hospital or specialist for further assessment and management control.

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