

Osteoarthritis and Its Treatment: What You Need to Know

By ACSH Staff — January 1, 2004



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Arthritis and other "rheumatic" (joint-related) conditions are the leading cause of disability in the United States. Between one sixth and one third of American adults that is, somewhere between 40 and 70 million people have some type of arthritis or chronic joint problem. The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis; more than 20 million Americans have this condition.

At the present time, osteoarthritis cannot be cured. However, much can be done to control its symptoms and maintain joint function. This report from the American Council on Science and Health provides a brief summary of the symptoms and causes of osteoarthritis and explains experts' current views on the best ways to treat this disease.

Osteoarthritis Basics

The word arthritis literally means joint inflammation. In practice, the word is used to refer to a group of more than 100 diseases and conditions³ that can cause pain, stiffness, and swelling in the joints, including some conditions such as osteoarthritis in which inflammation is not necessarily apparent.

The word osteoarthritis refers to a group of disorders that affect the cartilage of the joints. Cartilage is the slippery tissue that covers the ends of the bones in a joint. When cartilage is healthy, it allows bones to glide over one another easily. It works as a shock absorber, helping to cushion the joint against damage from physical movement. When cartilage breaks down and wears away, however, as it does in osteoarthritis, the joint does not function well. The bones rub against each other directly, causing pain, swelling, stiffness, and difficulty in movement. Over time, the joint may lose its normal shape, bits of bone (bone spurs) may grow on the edges of the joint, and small pieces of bone or cartilage may break off and float inside the joint. All of these changes contribute to additional pain, loss of function, and joint damage.

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