



WOMEN'S  
HEALTH  
INITIATIVE

## FACT SHEET — *Arthritis*

### What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a general term used to describe over 100 different conditions. These conditions generally result in pain, stiffness, or swelling of the joints or the soft tissues around the joints such as tendons and ligaments.

### What are the most common types of arthritis?

◆ **Osteoarthritis** — Also referred to as degenerative joint disease, osteoarthritis can affect the hands, the large weight-bearing joints of the body (knees, hips and ankles) and the spine. There are several conditions which increase your risk for osteoarthritis. This includes repetitive use of a specific joint such as frequent bending and kneeling. Overweight individuals have more risk for developing osteoarthritis in their knees. Some cases of osteoarthritis may be linked to hereditary factors and tend to affect the hands or hips.

◆ **Rheumatoid arthritis** — Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that causes inflammation in the joints. Signs of rheumatoid arthritis include swelling in three or more joints, swelling of the hands or wrists, morning stiffness lasting one hour or longer, or rheumatoid nodules (firm lumps under the skin often occurring over the joints). The cause of rheumatoid arthritis is unknown, but scientists believe it may be caused by a breakdown in the immune system.

### Facts and Figures

- ◆ More than 33 million Americans have some type of arthritis, 27.5 million being over the age of 45.
- ◆ Arthritis is more common among women than men.
- ◆ More people in the South have arthritis than any other region.
- ◆ Arthritis is more common as women age:
  - For women under 45 years the incidence is 38.2 per 1,000.
  - For women 65 to 74 years the incidence is 513.6 per 1,000.
  - For women 75 years and older the incidence is 604.4 per 1,000.

### What are the warning signs of arthritis?

- ◆ Swelling in one or more joints.
- ◆ Early morning stiffness.
- ◆ Recurring pain or tenderness in any joint.
- ◆ Inability to move a joint normally.
- ◆ Obvious redness or warmth in a joint.
- ◆ Unexplained weight loss, fever or weakness combined with joint pain.



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## What to do if you see warning signs

If any warning signs last longer than two weeks or if they are severe, consult your family doctor. At the examination, the doctor will ask questions about your symptoms, do a physical exam and possibly order x-rays or laboratory tests. He or she may refer you to a rheumatologist, a doctor who specializes in arthritis.

## What are some treatments for arthritis?

### *Short-term*

◆ **Medications** — medications most commonly used for osteoarthritis include analgesics and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). This includes medications such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Adverse side effects may result from the long-term use of these medications (including stomach ulcers, elevated blood pressure, and kidney problems). A newer class of prescription medications (COX-2 inhibitors) provide relief with fewer side effects. Rheumatoid arthritis is often treated with combinations of medications aimed at decreasing inflammation and attempting to induce remission of the inflammatory autoimmune arthritis.

◆ **Heat and cold** — Moist heat placed on a painful joint for 15 minutes may relieve the pain. An ice pack placed on a sore joint for 15 minutes may relieve the swelling or pain. Consult your doctor to see which is best for your type of arthritis.

◆ **Joint protection** — Using a brace allows joints to rest and protects them from injury. Avoid high impact activities such as running or jumping when joints are painful or swollen.

### *Long-term*

◆ **Weight Reduction** — Excess pounds causes extra weight to be placed on weight-bearing joints. According to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, studies have shown that women who lose an average of 11 pounds reduce the development of arthritis in their knees.

◆ **Exercise** — Swimming, light walking, water aerobics and range-of-motion exercises may reduce pain and stiffness. Always consult your doctor before starting any new exercise program.

◆ **Surgery** — In select patients, surgery may help provide relief from pain. The surgeon may realign the joint or replace the damaged joint with an artificial one.

The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) urges women to contact their osteopathic family physician for advice on preserving good health for an active lifestyle. Osteopathic physicians (D.O.s), physicians treating people, not just symptoms, are especially well qualified to assist in preventive healthcare since they are fully trained licensed physicians who have additional training that focuses on the body's structure and function, and its ability to heal itself. For more information visit the AOA's Web site at [www.aoa-net.org](http://www.aoa-net.org).