

UNDERSTANDING ARTHRITIS

We Are Here to Help!



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



INTRODUCTION

Arthritis is a general term used to describe more than 100 conditions that affect the joints and surrounding structures such as muscles, bones, tendons and ligaments. While the word literally means “joint inflammation,” arthritis includes a wide range of disorders — from wear-and-tear conditions to autoimmune and metabolic diseases which fall under the banner of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs).

Arthritis can affect people of all ages, including children (Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis). It is a leading cause of disability worldwide. Living with arthritis often means managing pain, stiffness and fatigue, but with the right support and treatment, many people lead active and fulfilling lives.



THE ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

The Arthritis Foundation of South Africa is committed to improving the lives of people affected by RMDs. In South Africa, limited awareness, delayed diagnosis and a severely under-resourced public health system contribute to significant unmet needs in care and support.

As a result, many individuals experience preventable disability and reduced quality of life due to a lack of timely treatment and appropriate disease management.

The Arthritis Foundation of South Africa is the only patient organisation representing all RMDs in SA. For the last 50 years we have been raising awareness of RMDs and providing support to patients living with RMDs through a range of activities.

Our Vision - A better quality of life for all affected by arthritis.

Our Mission - To empower those affected by arthritis to have a better quality of life through increasing awareness, providing education, support, and advocacy.

Our Purpose - To create awareness, educate, and provide support for people affected by rheumatic musculoskeletal diseases.



WE SEEK TO

Get recognition for RMDs and create an enabling environment for people living with RMDs in South Africa by focusing on the following areas:

- Creating a community/society empowered by information, education, and support.
- Getting recognition of RMDs e.g. classification for employees.
- Moving RMDs higher up on the priority list in the health sector.
- Enabling people living with RMDs to take care of themselves in a holistic way.
- Advocating for the appropriate continuous care of affected people delivered on time.
- Facilitating early diagnosis so that the disease outcome is much better in the long-term.



HOW ARTHRITIS MAY AFFECT YOU

Rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) affect an estimated 20–25% of the world's population at any given time, making them the most common cause of disability globally.

These conditions include arthritis, back pain, soft-tissue disorders, osteoporosis and widespread pain syndromes.

Within this broader group, arthritis alone affects approximately 10–15% of people worldwide, amounting to hundreds of millions of individuals living with joint disease and its associated impacts on mobility, independence and quality of life.

Arthritis affects each person differently. Symptoms may come and go, or persist over time.

Common experiences include:

- Joint pain, swelling or stiffness.
- Reduced mobility or function.
- Fatigue and reduced energy.
- Emotional responses such as frustration or anxiety.
- The need to adapt daily routines and activities.



COMMON TYPES OF ARTHRITIS

Although there are many forms of arthritis, most diagnoses fall into a few key categories:

Osteoarthritis (OA)

The most common form. It occurs when cartilage that cushions the joints gradually breaks down. This can be due to several factors such as an underlying inflammatory arthritis, trauma to the joints or crystals in joints, but when there is no underlying cause it's a common part of growing older. This is then called primary osteoarthritis.

- Often affects knees, hips, spine and the joint at the base of the thumb.
- Osteoarthritis in the joints in the fingers is more common in women and often affects families.
- Symptoms include pain that worsens with activity and stiffness after inactivity.
- Joints can have some swelling but this is often bony swelling of the underlying bone.
- There can be deformity of the joint as the disease progresses.

Inflammatory arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA), Psoriatic arthritis (PsA), Ankylosing spondylitis (AS). The immune reaction causes inflammation of the joint lining or synovium.

- Often affects small joints of hands and feet as well as larger joints.
- In RA there is usually symmetrical involvement of joints.
- In PsA there is skin and often nail involvement.
- In AS the pain is mainly in the back.
- May include fatigue and other symptoms.

Crystal arthritis (Gout)

Gout is the most common type of arthritis caused by urate crystals in joints.

- Chronic and progressive if not treated.
- Often affects the big toe, ankle or knee.
- Can become chronic affecting multiple joints.
- Associated with increased risk of heart disease.

Other related conditions

Soft tissue rheumatism and fibromyalgia can cause symptoms similar to arthritis and significantly affect quality of life.

TREATMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Managing arthritis is a partnership between you and your healthcare team. Treatment aims to control symptoms, reduce joint damage by treating the underlying disease, and improve daily functioning.

Treatment options may include:

- Pain-relieving medications and anti-inflammatory drugs.
- Disease-modifying treatments for inflammatory arthritis.
- Steroid therapy when needed.
- Surgery in advanced joint damage (e.g. joint replacement).
- Rehabilitation and lifestyle strategies.

Your healthcare team

Many professionals may be involved in your care:

- General practitioners (GPs) – first point of contact.
- Rheumatologists – specialists in arthritis.
- Orthopaedic surgeons – surgical care when needed.
- Physiotherapists – movement and pain management.
- Occupational therapists & biokineticists – support with daily activities.

Self-management strategies

Daily self-care plays a vital role in living well with arthritis:

- Stay physically active with appropriate exercise.
- Maintain a balanced, healthy diet.
- Rest during flare-ups.
- Protect joints using good posture and body mechanics.
- Practice relaxation or stress-management techniques.
- Use assistive devices if recommended.

We Are Here To Help!

You are not alone.

With the right care and support,
it is possible to live well with arthritis.

GET IN TOUCH

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**INCREASING AWARENESS, PROVIDING EDUCATION
AND OFFERING SUPPORT**