

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

Osteoarthritis

NICE 'clinical guidelines' advise the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases and the treatments they should receive.

This booklet is about the care and treatment of people with osteoarthritis in the NHS in England and Wales. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). It is written for people with osteoarthritis but it may also be useful for their families or carers or for anyone with an interest in the condition.

The booklet aims to help you understand the care and treatment options that should be available in the NHS. It does not describe osteoarthritis or the tests or treatments for it in detail. A member of your healthcare team should discuss these with you. There are examples of questions you could ask throughout this booklet to help you with this. Some sources of further information and support are on the back page.

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The advice in the NICE guideline covers the treatment, advice and support that people who have osteoarthritis should be offered by their healthcare professional and when being referred to specialist care.

This includes:

- diagnosis
- education
- exercise and physiotherapy
- medicines
- alternative therapies
- surgery.

It does not specifically look at the care and management of related conditions (for example, rheumatoid arthritis and joint pain).

Your care

Your treatment and care should take into account your personal needs and preferences, and you have the right to be fully informed and to make decisions in partnership with your healthcare team. To help with this, your healthcare team should give you information you can understand and that is relevant to your circumstances. All healthcare professionals should treat you with respect, sensitivity and understanding and explain osteoarthritis and the treatments for it simply and clearly.

The information you get from your healthcare team should include details of the possible benefits and risks of particular treatments. You can ask any questions you want to and can always change your mind as your treatment progresses or your condition or circumstances change. Your own preference for a particular treatment is important and your healthcare team should support your choice of treatment wherever possible.

Your treatment and care, and the information you are given about it, should take account of any religious, ethnic or cultural needs you may have. It should also take into account any additional factors, such as physical or learning disabilities, sight or hearing problems, or difficulties with reading or speaking English. Your healthcare team should be able to arrange an interpreter or an advocate (someone who supports you in putting across your views) if needed.

If you agree, your family and carers should have the chance to be involved in decisions about your care. Family members and carers also have the right to the information and support they need in their roles as carers.

If people are unable to understand a particular issue or are not able to make decisions for themselves, healthcare professionals should follow the advice that the Department of Health has produced about this. You can find this by going to the Department of Health website (www.dh.gov.uk/consent). Your healthcare professional should also follow the code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act. For more information about this, visit www.publicguardian.gov.uk

If you think that your care does not match what is described in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

*Many people believe that osteoarthritis inevitably gets worse and cannot be treated. This is **not** the case – you should discuss your treatment options with a member of your healthcare team.*

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a slow repair process that the body uses to fix injured joints. Usually this process of repair does not cause any symptoms. However, in some people the injury cannot be fixed because the damage to the joint is so severe or for some reason the body's ability to repair in this way becomes weakened. When this happens, damage to the affected joint continues and the symptoms of osteoarthritis appear.

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis in the UK. In joints of a person with osteoarthritis, the tissue covering the bones (also known as cartilage) becomes damaged and worn, which causes pain, stiffness and limited movement in affected areas. Occasionally, joints can swell up and become inflamed. The severity of symptoms varies greatly, with pain and symptoms often flaring up and settling back down again.

Osteoarthritis can occur in young people as well as older people. The hips, knees, hands and the lower part of the spine are most commonly affected. Shoulders, elbows, wrists and the feet can also be affected, but this is less common. Osteoarthritis may occur in more than one joint at any given time.

Many people consider osteoarthritis a normal part of ageing, and that this type of arthritis always gets worse and cannot be treated. However, osteoarthritis does not always get worse as you get older and there are treatments available and changes to your lifestyle that you can make to help ease the pain and symptoms.

When you visit your GP

Your GP should talk with you about what osteoarthritis is. They should also give you some leaflets to take away and read to help you understand more about osteoarthritis and what you can do to help ease your pain and symptoms (for additional sources of information, please see 'More information' on the back page).

Osteoarthritis can have a major impact on your life and your ability to go about everyday tasks. When deciding on how best to treat your osteoarthritis, your GP should take this into consideration as well as how your work, social life and relationships are being affected. Your GP should also consider how you and your carer (if you have one) are managing on a day-to-day basis.

Your GP should discuss with you how to manage your condition and agree a plan with you to help you work out the best treatment for you.

Your GP should discuss with you the following options as part of a self-management plan.

- Exercise.
- Weight loss if you are overweight.
- Use of suitable footwear.
- Application of heat or cold packs to the skin where it hurts.
- Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (or TENS for short) for pain relief.

You should also be given details on the treatment options that are available to you, including how any other conditions you might have could affect your osteoarthritis and its treatment. Your GP or a member of your healthcare team should arrange follow-up appointments with you to discuss your osteoarthritis and to check that the treatments you are receiving are still right for you.

Questions you might like to ask your healthcare team

- Please tell me more about osteoarthritis.
- What can I do to help treat my osteoarthritis?
- What changes can I make to my lifestyle to help my osteoarthritis?

Some treatments may not be suitable for you, depending on your exact circumstances. If you have questions about the specific treatments and options covered in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

Medicines for osteoarthritis

There are several medicines available to help ease the pain and symptoms of osteoarthritis. Therefore, if you are in pain or showing symptoms of osteoarthritis, then your GP will help you to find the one that works best for you.

Your GP may offer you paracetamol to ease the pain of your osteoarthritis. Your GP may also offer you other medicines that are applied to your skin where it hurts or taken as a tablet to ease the pain. There are several different types of pain-relieving medicine that your GP can offer (for example, anti-inflammatory medicines commonly referred to as NSAIDs and COX-2 inhibitors, or a type of medicine known as an opioid). Your GP should discuss with you the benefits and risks of taking them, particularly in combination with other medicines. If you have severe pain, you might be offered an injection of a medicine called a corticosteroid into the affected joint.

If you are already taking aspirin for another condition, then your GP may offer you another type of pain relief instead of anti-inflammatory medicines because these drugs can affect your digestive system.

Questions you might like to ask about your medicine

- Are there any side effects associated with this medicine?
- If I am taking medicines called NSAIDs or COX-2 inhibitors, should I be taking another drug to protect my stomach or gut?
- I have another condition – will this affect the treatment that is available to me?

Other treatments that you may be offered

Your GP should talk with you about exercise that you can do to help the osteoarthritis, when you need to rest and how to lose weight if you are overweight.

Your GP may also advise you to apply heat or cold packs to your joints, or to use a type of electrotherapy known as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation or TENS for short, to help ease the pain and symptoms you are experiencing.

Your GP may think that you need some type of joint support or shoe insoles if you have a specific type of joint pain, or that you need some sort of device to help you with walking (for example, walking sticks).

Your GP should explain all of your treatment options to you, and should discuss with you how any other conditions you may have could affect your treatment.

Referral for surgery

Most people with osteoarthritis do not need surgery. However, if you have tried a number of the treatments (including medicines) already mentioned, and you are still experiencing a lot of joint pain, then you and your GP may think that referral to a surgeon is the best option for you. If you are in severe pain then you may be referred for joint replacement surgery. You and your GP should discuss this before your symptoms and pain become severe and affect your ability to function normally over a long period of time. Surgery may be an option regardless of your age, whether you are male or female, whether or not you are overweight or smoke, or if you have other conditions in addition to osteoarthritis.

If you have a history of your knee 'locking', then your GP may recommend that you have a surgical procedure where your knee joint is washed out (also known as lavage and debridement). You should not be offered this treatment for any other symptom of osteoarthritis.

If a treatment described in this booklet appears suitable for you, but it is not available, you should talk to your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) in the first instance. If they are not able to help you, they should refer you to your local Independent Complaints Advocacy Service.

More information

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people with osteoarthritis. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Arthritis Research Campaign (**arc**), 0870 850 5000, www.arc.org.uk
- Arthritis Care, 0808 800 4050, www.arthritiscare.org.uk

NHS Direct online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) may also be a good starting point for finding out more. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further information and support.

About NICE

NICE produces guidance (advice) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider the best available evidence on the condition and treatments, the views of patients and carers and the experiences of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals working in the field. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This booklet and other versions of this guideline aimed at healthcare professionals are available at www.nice.org.uk/CG059

You can order printed copies of this booklet from NICE publications (phone 0845 003 7783 or email publications@nice.org.uk and quote reference N1460).

We encourage NHS and voluntary sector organisations to use text from this booklet in their own information about osteoarthritis.