



OSTEOARTHRITIS FLARE-UPS

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis. It happens when your joint breaks down faster than your body can repair it. Osteoarthritis is called a degenerative joint disease because it often gets worse over time, and it can't be cured. But there are many things we can do to slow it down and to help with pain and stiffness.

Sometimes symptoms of osteoarthritis can get worse for a short time and then improve. This is called a flare-up. You could notice more pain, stiffness, swelling, being less able to move, trouble sleeping or tiredness due to pain. A flare-up usually lasts for a few days and should be gone within a week or two.

Common causes of flare-ups

More pain does not necessarily mean more joint damage. Sometimes flare-ups happen when bits of cartilage (the smooth part at the ends of the bone) or bone spurs irritate your joint. Bone spurs are small pieces of extra bone which form near the joint because of inflammation and can then break off. It's often not clear why a flare-up happens.

Identifying what may have set the flare-up off can be helpful in reducing future flares:

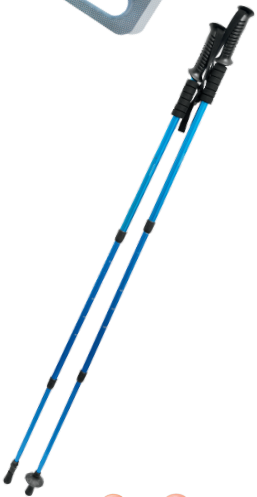
- cold or wet weather or a drop in barometric pressure
- injury
- using the joint more, for example, on the day you move house or go for a much longer walk than you're used to or poor posture

In general, keeping up muscle strength - particularly around the sore joints - is the best way to prevent pain and reduced mobility.



At-home treatment during a flare-up continued

- Heat (wheat bag, warm shower) for stiffness or sore muscles.
- Cold pack for swelling (remember to wrap ice or a cold pack in a towel to keep your skin safe)
- Body relaxation & breathing techniques to reduce mental stress & muscle tension.
- Do the things that help you to feel well in yourself, for example, spending time with friends, acupuncture, relaxation massage or rongoā Māori.



- Topical NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory) creams like ibuprofen or diclofenac are available over the counter from pharmacies (the government does not fund them).
- Capsaicin cream (Zostrix) is available from your GP.
- Regular paracetamol if you have used it safely before. Take two 500mg tablets every four hours, but no more than 8 tablets in total in any 24 hours or as directed by your doctor. It's usually cheapest from the supermarket unless you already have a supply from your GP. If you weigh less than 50kg (8 stone), check the maximum dose you can take with your doctor or pharmacist.
- Seek support from our online or face-to-face groups. Contact us to find out more.
- NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatories) by mouth if prescribed by your GP.
- If you don't usually like to take medication, a flare-up is a good time to choose to take some for a short time. If you do usually take medication, it is a good time to go up to the maximum dose for a short time before going back to your usual dose.
- Use assistive devices like a walking stick or tap turner. If you have compression gloves, insoles, a splint or a brace you stopped using pull it out of the back of the cupboard and use it now.
- Pace, prioritise, and plan activities over the day and week. Rest between activities.

If increased symptoms of pain and swelling do not ease and affect mobility and quality of life, talk to your doctor.

This Arthritis NZ Fact Sheet was clinically reviewed by Dr Emma Dunning, Healthify He Puna Waiora (formerly Health Navigator NZ), 2023.

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