



Arthritis

Your questions answered

Q. What is arthritis?

A. Arthritis is a general term used to describe over 150 different conditions. The more accurate name for them is musculoskeletal conditions, as they affect the muscles, bones and/or joints.

These conditions include [osteoarthritis](#), [back pain](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [fibromyalgia](#), [gout](#), [polymyalgia rheumatica](#), [lupus](#), [osteoporosis](#) and [ankylosing spondylitis](#).

Anyone can get a musculoskeletal condition, including [children](#). They affect people from all backgrounds and lifestyles. In fact, around 7 million Australians report having a musculoskeletal condition¹.

The good news is these conditions can be treated effectively with self-care and medicine.

Q. What is the musculoskeletal system and how does it work?

A. To understand how arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions may affect your body, it's helpful to know a little about the musculoskeletal system.

Your musculoskeletal system is made up of joints, bones, muscles, tendons and ligaments.

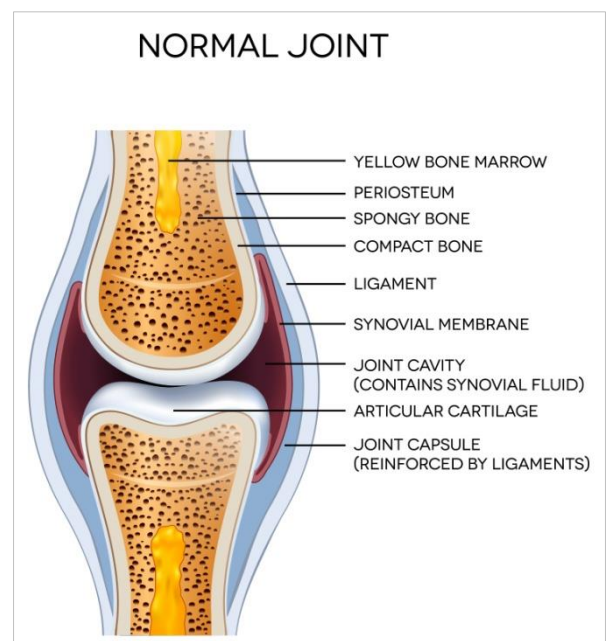
Joints are places where bones meet. Bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons work together so that you can twist, bend, stretch and move about.

Covering the ends of your bones is a thin layer of tissue called cartilage. It provides a slippery cushion that absorbs shocks, helps your joints move smoothly and prevents bones from rubbing against each other.

Around most of your joints is a tough capsule that holds your bones in place. The membrane lining the inside of the capsule produces synovial fluid. This fluid fills the capsule to nourish and lubricate your joint (like oil for a squeaky hinge).

Ligaments hold the joint together by joining one bone to another. Your muscles are attached to the bones by tendons. As your muscles contract, they pull on the bones to make the joint move.

Musculoskeletal conditions affect the normal functioning of your joints, muscles, bones and surrounding structures. The way this happens will depend on the condition you have.



Q. What causes musculoskeletal conditions?

A. We don't fully understand the causes of many musculoskeletal conditions.

Some are caused by a malfunctioning immune system that causes the body to target its own tissues in the joints rather than foreign bodies that cause disease (e.g. bacteria and viruses). We don't know why this happens, but it appears that your genes may play a role. These conditions include [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [psoriatic arthritis](#) and [juvenile arthritis](#).

Other musculoskeletal conditions, such as [gout](#), can be caused by a [metabolic condition](#).

And factors such as being overweight or obese, repetitive movements of a joint, joint damage, and not getting enough physical activity can contribute to developing conditions such as [back pain](#) and [osteoarthritis](#).

Q. What are the symptoms of musculoskeletal conditions?

A. Musculoskeletal condition affects people in different ways, and each condition will have specific symptoms.

However, common symptoms are:

- joint pain
- swelling, redness and warmth in a joint
- muscular aches and pains
- stiffness or reduced movement of a joint
- general symptoms such as fatigue and feeling unwell.

These symptoms can sometimes worsen, especially when you feel stressed, upset, overdo things, or don't get enough sleep. This is called a flare or flare-up.

Q. What should I do if I think I have a musculoskeletal condition?

A. If you've been experiencing joint or muscle pain, it's important that you discuss your symptoms with your doctor. Getting a diagnosis as soon as possible means that treatment can start quickly. This will give you the best possible outcomes.

A correct diagnosis will mean you get the most appropriate care, as treatment, especially medicines, will depend on your condition.

To diagnose your condition, your doctor will do some exams or tests. They may include:

- Your medical history. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, family history and other health issues.
- Physical examination. Your doctor will look for redness and swelling in and around the joint and test your joint's range of movement. Depending on the condition your doctor thinks you may have, they may also look for rashes, check your eyes and throat, and take your temperature.
- Scans and other tests. Again depending on the condition your doctor thinks you have, you may have blood tests to check for levels of inflammation in your blood or specific genetic markers. You may also have scans such as x-rays, ultrasound, CT or MRI to get a clearer picture of what's happening inside your joints.
- Referral to a specialist. If appropriate, your doctor will refer you to a specialist, often a rheumatologist, for diagnosis and specialised management of your condition.

Q. How are musculoskeletal conditions treated?

A. There are no cures for most musculoskeletal conditions, but your symptoms can be managed effectively.

Your treatment plan will fit your specific set of symptoms and needs. However, it will usually involve a combination of:

Self-care and lifestyle changes, such as regular exercise, stress management and improving sleep quality. See the next section for more detail.

Medicines. Combined with self-care and lifestyle changes, medicines may be used to control your musculoskeletal condition, manage pain, stay active and help you sleep. Treatment and management options will vary depending on your condition, its severity and the parts of the body affected.

Some medications aim to reduce pain and inflammation. Others work on the disease process and aim to slow down or prevent joint damage.

The most common medicines used to treat musculoskeletal conditions include:

- pain relievers (or analgesics)
- topical creams, gels and ointments
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- corticosteroids (or steroids)
- disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)
- biologics and biosimilars.

Find out more about [these medicines](#).

Q. What can I do to control my symptoms?

A. As well as taking any medicines as prescribed, you can reduce the impact of your symptoms.

Learn about your condition. What type of [arthritis or musculoskeletal condition](#) do you have? What are the treatment options? What can you expect in the future? Knowing as much as possible about your condition means that you can make informed decisions about your healthcare and play an active role in managing it.

Exercise regularly. This is essential to managing your condition. Evidence shows that regular exercise improves symptoms such as pain, fatigue and poor sleep. It's also vital for maintaining muscle strength, joint flexibility and bone health. When starting an exercise program, you should try to [incorporate exercises](#) that improve flexibility, muscle strength, balance, and overall fitness and endurance. Start exercising slowly and gradually increase the time and intensity of your exercise sessions over weeks and months. And choose exercises you enjoy doing. This will make it easier to be consistent. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can help you work out an exercise program that's right for you.

Learn ways to manage your pain. Pain is a common symptom of most musculoskeletal conditions, so it's crucial to learn ways to manage it effectively. Read our [A-Z guide for managing pain](#) for more information.

Work closely with your healthcare team. The best way to live well with a musculoskeletal condition is by working closely with the people in your healthcare team (e.g. GP, physio, rheumatologist). Keep them informed about how you're doing and if you've experienced any changes in your symptoms or tried new medicines, complementary therapies, supplements or other treatments.



Protect your joints. Many [aids, equipment and gadgets](#) can make everyday tasks easier. They can also help reduce stress on your muscles and joints, save energy and prevent fatigue. They can help you with everything from cooking, cleaning, getting dressed, driving, gardening, using technology and working. An occupational therapist can advise you on aids, equipment and home modifications. You can also check out our range of aids in [our online shop](#).

Improve sleep quality. Not getting enough [quality sleep](#) can worsen your symptoms; however, getting a good night's sleep when you have chronic pain can be challenging. If you're having problems sleeping, talk with your doctor about ways you can address this.

Manage stress. Stress can also aggravate your symptoms, so learning to deal with stress is extremely helpful. Things you can do to manage stress include planning your day and setting priorities, using [relaxation techniques](#) such as going for a walk, [getting a massage](#) or [listening to music](#), and, where possible, avoiding people and situations that cause you stress.

Pace yourself. [Pacing](#) is an effective strategy to help you do the things you want to do by finding the right balance between rest and activity (both physical and mental). This will help reduce your risk of pain flares and fatigue.

Practise mindfulness. Regularly practising [mindfulness meditation](#) has been shown to improve mood, relieve stress, improve sleep, improve mental health and reduce pain.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet. While no diet can cure musculoskeletal conditions, a healthy and [well-balanced diet](#) is the best for good health and wellbeing. Keeping to a healthy weight is also important as any extra weight puts added strain on your joints, especially load-bearing joints such as your hips, knee and ankles.

Quit smoking. [Smoking](#) is linked to [back pain](#), [neck pain](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#) and [osteoporosis](#). Smoking also causes fatigue and slower healing, which can make your pain worse. And it can make some of your medications less effective. Smoking also affects your ability to be active and exercise.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- your rheumatologist
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [exercise physiologist](#)
- [occupational therapist](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | [msk.org.au](#) | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).



More to explore

- About arthritis
Arthritis Foundation <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/detail?content=aboutarthritis>
- About arthritis
Versus Arthritis UK <https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis>
- Arthritis
healthdirect <https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-conditions>
- Disease and conditions
American College of Rheumatology <https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions>
- Arthritis
MedlinePlus <https://medlineplus.gov/arthritis.html>
- Pain conditions
PainHEALTH <https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-conditions>
- Patient education: Arthritis (Beyond the Basics)
Up-to-Date <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/arthritis-beyond-the-basics>

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Reference

ⁱ Chronic musculoskeletal conditions, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Accessed 2 August 2022. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-conditions-disability-deaths/chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions/overview>