

Arthritis

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a group of conditions that cause damage to one or more joints. In the most common form, osteoarthritis or “wear-and-tear” arthritis, there is no obvious cause but often there are several predisposing factors, such as genetic factors, obesity, previous minor injuries. The other, less common form of arthritis can be associated with systemic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, gout, etc. Most forms of arthritis are slowly progressing over a number of years with flare-ups and good periods.



Figure 4
X-rays of two knees illustrating
(left) rheumatoid arthritis and
(right) degenerative osteoarthritis

What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Most common symptoms are pain (usually a constant ache, often present at rest or nighttime as well), swelling, stiffness or loss of movement, limited walking distance, disability.

What is the treatment for arthritis?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for arthritis. The aim of treatment is to alleviate the symptoms, especially to relieve the pain. Treatment options are broadly divided into conservative and operative options.

What is conservative treatment?

The aim of conservative treatment is to relieve the pain, improve mobility and to prolong the life of your natural joint. Modalities include the regular use of pain killers (such as Paracetamol, Codein, Tramadol), non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs - like Ibuprofen, Diclofenac, Voltaren), supplements (glucosamin, chondroitin and fish oils), cortisone injections, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, activity modification, regular appropriate exercise, weight control and occasionally bracing. Inflammatory arthritic diseases usually require specific medical treatment.

What are the operative options?

Some joints are amenable to key-hole operations (arthroscopy). An arthroscopic “tidy-up” or debridement works usually only in the early stages when a mechanical problem is present (such as a torn cartilage causing jamming or pain). In later stages, when the joint cartilage is extensively lost, benefits from a debridement are often minor and short lived. Realignment of a joint or osteotomy works in some forms of arthritis in certain (usually the younger) patients. This operation preserves your own joint and changes the loading of the joint, so that more pressure goes through the (relatively) normal part of the joint. This is most commonly done for knee arthritis.

Arthroplasty or joint replacement is an operation when part of or the whole joint is replaced with an artificial joint. Typically an artificial joint is made of a metal alloy (stainless steel,

cobalt-chromium, titanium), plastic (polyethylene) and sometimes ceramic (alumina or zirconia). It can be press-fit or bound to the bone using bone cement.

When is the right time for a joint replacement?

Often with the progression of arthritis, conservative treatment cannot control the symptoms any more. When making a decision you should think about the following:

- How much would you benefit from relieving your pain? The more pain now, the bigger difference a successful operation will make.
- Is it worth taking the risks? All operations have risks and potentially an operation with complications could make you worse than you were before.
- Are you ready for a major operation?
- A joint replacement can wear out in time. Revising the joint replacement usually means a bigger operation with higher risks and less satisfactory outcome comparing to the first (primary) joint replacement. The younger and more active you are the more likely that the joint replacement will wear out in your lifetime.
- Bear in mind that a joint replacement is an operation to improve the quality of life, not a life saving procedure. Delaying it usually does not mean that you couldn't have the same operation later.

What are the risks of an operation?

Please check the individual operation for specific risks.

Generally speaking when coming for an operation, you should consider the following risks:

- Anaesthetic complications
- Death
- Infection
- Damage to nerves and vessels
- Deep venous thrombosis - a blood clot in the leg
- Pulmonary embolism - a blood clot in the lung
- Continuing pain
- Loss of movement or stiffness