

# About Arthritis



By: Nasira Bhikha-Vallee  
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One in every seven South Africans has some form of Arthritis! It is an illness with varying degrees of intensity, usually chronic, and may trouble you on and off for a lifetime. If you are a sufferer you will be acutely aware of the impact that Arthritis has on daily life. Not only does it affect the movements you rely on for everyday activities, it is also often painful and at times debilitating. The good news though, is that there are treatment options available to help you live a quality-filled life in spite of your condition.

The word arthritis actually means joint inflammation (arth=joint, itis=inflammation) and is a term used to describe more than 100 rheumatic conditions that affect joints, the tissues surrounding the joint and other connective tissue. The exact cause of arthritis has yet to be discovered, but every year more and more research is being undertaken in many countries and new treatments are being developed.

Though the pattern and severity of symptoms vary, depending on the specific form of the disease, rheumatic conditions are typically characterized by pain and stiffness in and around one or more joints. The symptoms can develop gradually or suddenly. Certain rheumatic conditions may also involve the immune system and internal organs of the body. People of all ages, including children and young adults, can develop arthritis.

Normally, inflammation is the way one's body responds to an injury or to the presence of disease agents. During this reaction, many cells of the body's immune system rush to the injured area to 'wipe out' the cause of the problem, clean up damaged cells and repair tissues that have been hurt.

In many forms of arthritis, inflammation does not go away as it should. Instead, it becomes part of the problem, damaging healthy tissues of the body thereby resulting in more inflammation and damage. This damage can change the bones and other tissues of the joints, sometimes affecting their shape and making movement painfully difficult.

Today the progress and severity of most forms of arthritis can be modified and the pain controlled to a greater degree. Generally, however, arthritis requires sufferers and their families to adapt aspects of their lives to cope with their condition.

**Although many types of rheumatic conditions are identified, the three most common types of arthritis are:**

**Osteoarthritis (OA)** – is a disease characterized by degeneration of cartilage and underlying bone within a joint as well as bony overgrowth. The breakdown of these tissues eventually leads to pain and stiffness. The joints most commonly affected are the knees, hips, hands and spine. The specific causes of osteoarthritis are unknown, but are believed to be a result of both mechanical and molecular events in the affected joint. Disease onset usually begins after the age of 40. Treatment for OA focuses on relieving symptoms, improving function and a combination of physical therapy, weight control, and medication.

**Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)** – is a systemic inflammatory disease that manifests itself in multiple joints of the body. It primarily affects the lining of the joints (synovial membrane), but can also affect other organs, leading to erosion of the cartilage and bone and possibly joint deformity. Pain, swelling, and redness are common. RA is believed to be the result of a faulty immune response. It can begin at any age and is associated with fatigue and prolonged stiffness after rest. There is no cure for RA, but drugs are increasingly available to treat the disease. In addition to medication and surgery, good self-management, including exercise, are known to reduce pain and disability.

**Gout** – is a rheumatic disease resulting from deposition of uric acid crystals (monosodium urate) in bodily tissues and fluids. This process is caused by an overproduction or under excretion of uric acid. Certain common medications and dietary foods are known to be contributory factors. Acute gout will typically manifest itself as a red, hot, and swollen joint with excruciating pain. These flare-ups respond well to treatment with oral anti-inflammatory medicines and may be prevented with medication and diet changes. Recurrent bouts of gout can lead to a degenerative form of arthritis called gouty arthritis.

### **Risk Factors for arthritis:**

Certain factors have been shown to be associated with a greater risk of arthritis. Some of these can be addressed while others cannot.

- ***Non-modifiable risk factors***
  - Age: The risk of developing arthritis increases with age.
  - Gender: 60% of all people with arthritis are women. Gout is more common in men.
  - Genetic: Specific genes are associated with a higher risk of arthritis.
  
- ***Modifiable risk factors***
  - Weight
  - Joint Injuries
  - Infection
  - Occupation

### **Management of arthritis:**

The focus of treatment for arthritis is to control pain, minimize joint damage, and improve or maintain function and quality of life.

### ***Conventional treatment of arthritis might involve the following:***

- Medication.
- Non-pharmacological therapies.
- Physical or occupational therapy.
- Joint assistive aids.
- Patient education.
- Weight loss.
- Surgery.

Tibb's view on the types of arthritis and their management is dependent on the Temperament of each person. For example, osteoarthritis is linked to an excess of coldness and dryness, whilst rheumatoid arthritis is generally associated with heat and moisture. Treatment would therefore be tailor-made to the specific condition, taking into account all aspects of the patient. In all cases, lifestyle adjustments would be advised. A diet high in fruit and vegetables, whole grains and increased water intake would be beneficial, and avoiding caffeine products and smoking is strongly encouraged. Yoga exercises and walking would also assist patients in delaying degeneration. Tibb practitioners further recommend cupping and massage to relieve pain.

If you are a sufferer, empower yourself by learning more about arthritis and monitor the conditions which seem to worsen your symptoms. Through knowledge, you can learn to live with arthritis without it taking over your life.