

Unraveling Arthritis

One of the most common questions patients ask their physical therapists about their musculoskeletal pain is "Do I have arthritis?" A simple question; a complex answer.

Let's start by defining "arthritis." Arthritis is revealed as pain, stiffness, and/or swelling (signs of inflammation) within a joint. There are more than 100 different variations of arthritis and related conditions! Describing all of these disorders is clearly beyond the scope of this article, however we'll focus on the three most common arthritic conditions: osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and gout. The nature of these disorders is very different even if they produce a similar end result.

Osteoarthritis, also known as degenerative joint disease, is by far the most common type of arthritis. It affects primarily older adults, particularly those who are overweight, have a genetic predisposition, or who have had a previous injury. Gradually over a long period of time, the cartilage in a joint wears out leading to pain and stiffness. Osteoarthritis may occur in many joints but tends to affect the knees, hips, spine, and other weight-bearing joint most frequently.

Rheumatoid arthritis affects people of all ages, but tends to strike women over 40 preferentially. Even children may suffer from a variation called juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. The immune system, which normally identifies and destroys foreign pathogens, loses its ability to differentiate these invaders from normal, healthy cartilage cells. Consequently, the immune system attacks and destroys the otherwise healthy cartilage cells producing joint inflammation and the symptoms of arthritis.

Gout occurs primarily in men and preferentially affects the big toe. The body produces or cannot rid itself of excess uric acid. As a result, uric acid crystals may form inside a joint making it painful and stiff. Foods such as sardines, anchovies, and organ meats may elevate the uric acid level in the blood and increase the chance of gout.

Treatment of arthritis varies considerably depending on the type of arthritis. Not all musculoskeletal pain stems from arthritic joints. If you suspect you have arthritis, consult your health care professional.