

What is the osteoarthritis of the ankle?

Osteoarthritis is a condition that affects the joints, causing pain and stiffness. It is made up of two joints which allows your foot to move up and down and from side to side. When the ankle develops osteoarthritis, some of the cartilage roughens and becomes thin and the joint doesn’t move as smoothly as it should. In severe cases the cartilage can become so thin that it no longer covers the bone resulting in reduced joint space which can be a cause of pain.



https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/ankle-joint-anatomy-labeled-229583692

**How is it caused?**

Osteoarthritis of the ankle can be caused by a combination of factors:

* Previous joint injury such as repeated sprains or ankle fractures
* Age: occurs mostly in those aged over 40
* Gender: it is twice as common in women
* Obesity: Being overweight increases the strain on your joints
* Genetic factors: if a close family member has osteoarthritis, you are more likely to develop the condition

**What are the symptoms?**

Ankle osteoarthritis can present differently in everyone. The most common symptoms include:

* Pain and difficulty weight bearing
* Early morning joint stiffness less than 30 minutes
* Reduced movement
* Crepitus (grating/grinding)
* Giving way
* Locking

**How is it diagnosed?**

Ankle osteoarthritis is normally diagnosed based on the signs and symptoms identified during a physical examination. X-rays taken in standing can be useful but are not always required. There are no blood tests for osteoarthritis but they can be used to rule out other conditions.

**What can I do?**

Stay Active: When you have osteoarthritis it is important to keep active. Exercise has been shown to ease pain and improved function for people with ankle osteoarthritis. Gentle exercise in the form of specific exercises for your joint (see below), or more generalised activity such as swimming or walking, can help you can strengthen the muscles and protect the joint.

These exercises should be done 2-3 times daily up to 10 times each. They may make your muscles ache initially. Stop if the exercises severely aggravate your symptoms.



Medication: Over-the-counter analgesia, such as paracetamol or anti inflammatories such as ibuprofen may also help to reduce your symptoms. If you require further information on pain relief, speak to your GP or pharmacist.

Warmth: Can help reduce symptoms, use for 10 minutes twice daily.

Weight management: Some studies have shown that losing weight can help to reduce the frequency of ankle pain from 34% to 2% in previously obese patients.

Aids: Walking aids can help to reduce some of the load through your joint. Ankle supports and braces can be used to reduce instability in severe cases.

Pacing your activities: try to find the right balance between activity and rest to avoid overstraining your joints

Footwear:Getting the right footwear is important to support your ankle and prevent further injury. High heels and unsupportive shoes such as flip flops can increase your risk of further injury.

**Factors influencing pain and recovery**

During your recovery a number of other factors can influence your pain levels. Keep the following factors in mind to help move the healing process along:

Look after yourself: Pain is not usually simply a physical problem. Your general well-being can make you vulnerable to pain and your wellbeing can also be made worse by pain. Looking after your general health and well-being will help recovery. There is helpful advice on this website: [https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/)

Reduce stress and anxiety: It is normal for people with pain to have stress, anxiety and change in mood. This may affect your ability to cope with the pain and may influence your pain levels. Help is available if you are being affected by stress, anxiety or low mood – see the links below or discuss with your practitioner.

It is important that your whole nervous system is in a healthy state to aid recovery. If your brain is stressed or overworked this may slow recovery. Relaxation is an important part of your recovery. Simple relaxation techniques may help manage pain and stress. Try to set aside some time each day to relax – you can use relaxation techniques as linked below, or simply an activity you enjoy – reading, deep breathing, sitting in the garden, singing – whatever relaxes you.

Find help and support here: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

<https://www.northessexiapt.nhs.uk/west-essex>

Physical Activity: Exercise improves fitness, confidence with movement and strength. It can also help reduce your stress and tension and improve your mood and quality of sleep, helping support you to return to normal activities. Perhaps you could simply start by trying to walk for 10 minutes per day.

Alcohol: Avoid alcohol in the early stages of healing (first three days). Evidence has shown this can slow down recovery and increase the chances of re-injury. <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/>

Sleep: Sleep is very important for your wellbeing. Poor sleep quality, and lack of sleep can make managing pain more difficult. Consistently getting 6-9 hours is recommended. Get help and tips here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/>

Smoking: Smoking can also impact how quickly tissues can heal and affect pain levels. For help with stopping smoking <https://www.essexlifestyleservice.org.uk/stop-smoking/> <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/>

**How long will it last?**

You can expect a flare up in your symptoms to last anywhere between a few weeks to a couple of months. If your ankle joint has significant degenerative changes you may experience some ongoing symptoms. If your symptoms have persisted despite following the advice and exercise provided in this leaflet you may need the guidance of a physiotherapist to help you return to normal activity.

If you require 1:1 physiotherapy treatment please fill out a self-referral form which can found at <https://eput.nhs.uk/our-services/essex/west-essex-community-health-services/adults/rehabilitation/musculo-skeletal-physiotherapy> and send to epunft.mskphysio@nhs.net

If your symptoms have worsened despite the advice given we would recommended you see a healthcare professional for review.

**Is there anything I should avoid?**

Over rest: your symptoms are more likely to get worse if you sit and do nothing; too much rest is likely to increase stiffness and can result in muscle weakness

High impact activities: Jumping, hopping, skipping and running may aggravate your symptoms if done too much too quickly.

**What other options are there?**

Injections: Studies have shown a steroid injection into the ankle joint can provide short (6 weeks) to medium term (3 months) pain relief.

Surgery: Depending on the severity of your symptoms, XR findings and medical history, you may be referred to an orthopaedic consultant for an opinion regarding surgery. Different types of surgery include:

Arthroscopy: is a keyhole surgery where the ankle is washed out and any bony spurs and damaged cartilage can be removed.

Arthrodesis: (also known as fusion) aims to fuse the ankle bones together, using screws, to eliminate motion in the joint thus reducing pain and improving function. This will affect the way you walk so should be discussed fully with your surgeon.

Total Ankle Replacement: aims to improve pain while maintaining some of the motion in the joint. The joint is replaced with a prosthetic joint.