



Are You at Greater Risk of Developing Osteoarthritis?

by ALISON RICHARDS

Osteoarthritis Risk Factors

Osteoarthritis is a painful condition that affects joints in any area of the body, but is most commonly experienced in the hands, knees, hips and spine. Usually associated with older age it can also affect younger people, and I feel relatively young to be affected by this disease, in my early 50s. It affects my fingers mainly, and on one hand in particular where I can't grip anything and sometimes struggle to hold a pen.

Since the joint damage cannot be reversed, understanding the risk factors of osteoarthritis is vital as many of them are preventable.

Age

The main risk factor for osteoarthritis is age, and this is something which you cannot do anything about unfortunately! Although some people are diagnosed in their 20s, it is much more prevalent in the over-60s, with over a third of over-65s suffering with the condition.

The main reason for this is thought to be that as we age our bodies become more worn down, with over-use of our joints particularly. Our bone structures degenerate with time, and ligaments get stiff.

Although you can't turn back the clock, staying active and taking part in regular exercise will keep your joints moving and less prone to some of the degeneration associated with osteoarthritis.

Gender

In older people, women are more likely to be diagnosed with osteoarthritis than men, particularly in the knees and hands. It's not clear why this is the case, although some research shows that the menopause has an impact on women's joints so could influence the onset of osteoarthritis.

Weight

One of the preventable risk factors for osteoarthritis is obesity. If you are overweight then you are 4-5 times more likely to develop knee osteoarthritis due to the increased stress on the joints. Osteoarthritis is by far the most common form of arthritis and this is largely down to the rise in obesity.

As well as the extra weight placing additional strain on joints, the abundance of fat in the body accelerates damage to cartilages. Fatty tissue produces proteins which cause inflammation and damage to the joints.

Osteoarthritis progresses faster if you are carrying extra weight, particularly on weight-bearing joints such as knees, hips and the lower back. If you are just 10 pounds overweight then your knees are subject to between 15 and 50 extra pounds of pressure. Simple tasks such as walking up a flight of stairs or squatting down to pick

something up place extra tension on knee and hip joints, which is magnified if you are overweight.

The good news is that the condition can be managed and joint health can improve by losing weight to put you within the normal range. Ideally your BMI should be between 18 and 25 and you can calculate what yours is using this tool from the CDC.

Losing weight has so many other physical and mental health benefits, but will have a particularly positive impact on your quality of life if you can reduce the symptoms and pain associated with osteoarthritis.

Joint Stress and Injuries

If you have injured a joint in the past, whether whilst exercising or as a result of an accident, then you are at an increased risk of osteoarthritis. Playing sports puts extra pressure on weight-bearing joints, and that kind of repetitive tension can lead to osteoarthritis.

Injuries which are linked to osteoarthritis include a torn or strained anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), a torn cartilage, ligament injuries and dislocated joints. Knee surgery also leads to an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis which may not surface until many years later.

Certain occupations are more likely to lead to osteoarthritis in later life too. Construction workers are at a greater risk due to their heavy lifting and use of vibrating tools such as jackhammers. Any jobs which include heavy manual labor are also affected such as lumber workers and farmers.

Teachers, nurses, hairdressers and other workers who are on their feet all day are prone to foot arthritis. Musicians, dancers and gymnasts have looser joints and the repetitive movements required by these roles mean that they are at a higher risk of injury and long term joint issues. Truck drivers who have poor posture are prone to back problems and manufacturing workers who do repetitive manual tasks can develop osteoarthritis.

If your job is one of those mentioned then it's vital to learn good posture, correct handling techniques and ways to support joints to prevent damage. Osteoarthritis can be prevented or eased by simply taking plenty of breaks and breaking up the day with a range of tasks to avoid the same joints being burdened every time.

Genes

Unfortunately, one risk factor for osteoarthritis which cannot be prevented is if you have a family history of the disease. Genetic joint defects can cause osteoarthritis and you are more likely to develop the condition if your parents, siblings or grandparents suffered too.

Other Conditions Which Are a Higher Risk for Osteoarthritis

There are a number of other conditions which mean that you have a higher risk of developing osteoarthritis. These include rheumatoid arthritis, gout, diabetes, those with bone disorders or peripheral neuropathy.

Osteoarthritis is a very painful condition which in many cases can be prevented. Taking action now such as losing weight or adjusting your physical activity to protect your joints can help avoid problems in older age. If your occupation puts you at a higher risk it's worth discussing ways of mitigating the effects on your body with your manager or health and safety officer. Remember, prevention is better than cure!