SYMPTOM

Joint pain

Joint pain is aching, soreness, or discomfort where two or more bones meet.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, soreness, stiffness, or sharp pain with movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
Knees, hips, shoulders, fingers, ankles, or other joints

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Overuse, minor injury, osteoarthritis

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A hot, swollen joint with fever or feeling unwell

USUALLY LASTS
Days after injury; longer with arthritis or ongoing inflammation

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists two weeks, returns, or limits daily activities

Overview

Joint pain is discomfort in a place where bones meet, such as a knee, hip, shoulder, or finger. It may affect one joint or several joints at the same time.

The pain may come from the joint itself or from nearby muscles, tendons, ligaments, or fluid-filled cushions called bursae. Tendons connect muscle to bone, while ligaments connect bones to each other.

Joint pain is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Overuse and minor injuries are common causes. Arthritis, which means inflammation or damage within a joint, can also cause pain. Less often, sudden joint pain is linked to an infection or another problem needing prompt care.

What it may feel or look like

Joint pain can be mild and nagging or sharp enough to limit movement. It may be present all the time or only during certain activities.

You may notice:

The pattern can offer useful clues. Pain after activity may suggest overuse or a mechanical

joint problem. Prolonged morning stiffness, swelling in several joints, or symptoms on both sides of the body may point toward inflammation. These patterns do not confirm a particular condition.

- Aching, burning, tenderness, or sharp pain
- Stiffness after rest or on waking
- Pain during movement or when putting weight on the joint
- Swelling, warmth, or redness
- Clicking, grinding, or a feeling that the joint catches
- Reduced movement, weakness, or difficulty using the joint normally

Common causes

Common causes include overuse, a sprain or strain, and osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis involves gradual changes to joint cartilage and other joint tissues. It often causes pain with activity and stiffness after sitting or resting.

Pain may also come from tissues around the joint. Tendinitis is irritation of a tendon. Bursitis is inflammation of a bursa, a small sac that reduces friction near a joint. These problems often follow repeated movements or an increase in activity.

Less common causes include inflammatory forms of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks joint tissue. Psoriatic arthritis can occur with the skin condition psoriasis. Gout causes sudden inflammation when crystals collect in a joint, often producing intense pain, swelling, and redness.

Other possibilities include an old injury, joint hypermobility, medication effects, or an infection elsewhere in the body that triggers joint inflammation. Lyme disease may cause joint symptoms after exposure to infected ticks in areas where the disease occurs.

Urgent causes include an infected joint, called septic arthritis. This often causes rapid pain, swelling, warmth, and difficulty moving the joint. Fever or feeling generally unwell may occur. Bleeding into a joint can also cause sudden swelling, particularly after an injury or in someone with a bleeding condition or taking blood-thinning medicine.

When to seek medical care

Arrange same-day medical assessment if:

These symptoms may need testing and treatment without delay. Do not drive yourself if pain or reduced movement makes driving unsafe.

Seek emergency care after a major injury if the joint looks deformed, a bone may be broken, or the limb below the injury is numb, unusually pale, blue, or cold.

For routine care, book an appointment if pain lasts longer than about two weeks, keeps returning, disturbs sleep, or limits work and daily activities. You should also arrange a review for ongoing swelling, prolonged morning stiffness, unexplained weight loss, or pain in several joints.

- A joint suddenly becomes very painful, hot, swollen, or red
- Joint pain occurs with fever, chills, or feeling significantly unwell
- A joint swells quickly without a clear minor injury
- You cannot use the joint or put weight on it
- Sudden swelling occurs while you take blood-thinning medicine

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began, which joints are affected, and whether symptoms followed an injury or change in activity. They may ask about stiffness, swelling, fever, rashes, recent infections, tick exposure, and family or personal history of arthritis.

The examination may assess warmth, swelling, tenderness, range of movement, strength, and joint stability. The areas above and below the painful joint may also be checked because pain can travel from another location.

Tests are not always needed. Depending on your symptoms, testing may include:

Joint fluid can be checked for infection, bleeding, or crystals associated with gout. This is especially important when one joint becomes suddenly hot and swollen.

- Blood tests for inflammation, infection, or certain immune conditions
- An X-ray to look for injury or longer-term joint changes
- Ultrasound or MRI to examine soft tissues or hidden joint damage
- Removal of a small sample of joint fluid with a needle

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause, the joint involved, and how much the pain affects you.

For mild pain after overuse or a minor injury, temporarily reduce activities that worsen it. Complete rest is rarely needed for long periods. Gentle movement can help prevent stiffness, but stop if an activity causes sharp pain or increasing swelling.

A wrapped cold pack may help recent pain or swelling. Heat may feel better for stiffness. Protect your skin with a towel and avoid temperatures that could burn or damage it.

Pain medicines may help some people. A pharmacist or healthcare professional can advise whether paracetamol, an anti-inflammatory gel, or another option is suitable.
Anti-inflammatory medicines are not safe for everyone, including some people with stomach, kidney, heart, bleeding, or pregnancy-related concerns. Follow the product label and avoid combining products with the same active ingredient.

Depending on the cause, treatment may include physiotherapy, exercises to improve strength and movement, weight management support, a brace, prescribed medicine, an injection, or surgery. Inflammatory arthritis and joint infections need cause-specific medical treatment rather than self-care alone.

What to expect

Pain from minor overuse or a mild injury often improves over days to a few weeks. Return to activity gradually as movement becomes more comfortable and swelling settles.

Osteoarthritis and inflammatory arthritis can cause symptoms that come and go or continue over time. Early assessment can help protect movement, reduce pain, and identify treatment that fits your needs.

Seek another review if symptoms worsen, a new joint becomes involved, or the expected improvement does not happen. A change in the pattern may mean the original cause needs to be reconsidered.

Common questions

Should I keep moving a painful joint?

Gentle movement is often useful when there has been no major injury and the joint is not hot or rapidly swelling. Avoid movements that sharply increase pain. A physiotherapist can help if you are unsure how to remain active safely.

Does clicking mean the joint is damaged?

Not necessarily. Painless clicking or cracking can occur in healthy joints. Arrange an assessment if clicking comes with pain, swelling, locking, giving way, or reduced movement.

Can weather changes cause joint pain?

Some people report changes in symptoms with weather conditions, but weather does not explain every new or worsening pain. Persistent swelling, warmth, or loss of function still needs assessment.

Is joint pain always arthritis?

No. Pain may come from an injury, overuse, tendons, bursae, or pain referred from another area. Arthritis is one group of possible causes.

Sources

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