

# Quality Standards

## Patient Reference Guide

### Osteoarthritis

Care for Adults With Osteoarthritis of the Knee,  
Hip, or Hand

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DRAFT

**Health Quality  
Ontario**

*Let's make our health system healthier*

Quality standards outline what high-quality care looks like. They focus on conditions where there are large variations in how care is delivered, or where there are gaps between the care provided in Ontario and the care patients should receive.

This guide addresses variations and gaps in care in Ontario that need attention when it comes to managing osteoarthritis of the knee, hip, or hand. It is based on the best available evidence and was created in partnership with people living with osteoarthritis, their family and caregivers, and health care professionals.

A more detailed version of this quality standard, written for health care professionals, is available on our website. You can find it at [hqontario.ca](http://hqontario.ca).

This guide is for adults living with osteoarthritis of the knee, hip, or hand—to help you know what to ask for when receiving treatment and to ensure you receive the highest-quality care.

Osteoarthritis is a condition that affects the tissues in the joints (the connections between bones), causing pain, swelling, stiffness, and loss of movement. Knees, hip, and hands are the joints most commonly affected by this type of arthritis.

Having osteoarthritis can make it hard to do your normal activities, but there are ways to manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life. The people on your health care team want to help you feel confident to manage your symptoms and live the best life you can. The more they know about you and your goals, the better they can help create a plan that meets your needs.

## **If you or someone you care about is looking to treat their osteoarthritis ...**

You can use this guide to work with your health care professionals to make a plan that works for you, including access to culturally appropriate care. Use this information to ask informed questions and to learn more about what types of care can help. This guide includes information on:

- Diagnosis, assessment, and care plans
- Learning to manage your osteoarthritis through exercises, daily physical activity, weight management, and other strategies
- Pain medication
- Surgery

Care plans can be very different for each person, so it is important to work closely with your care providers.

Here are some things to consider.

## **Diagnosis and Assessment**

- Getting a diagnosis early is important so that you can manage symptoms and maintain your quality of life. The symptoms of osteoarthritis tend to get worse with time, and it's best to start therapies early.
- You should see a health care professional to find out if you have osteoarthritis if you have persistent pain or aching in your knee, hip, or hand when you move them *and* if they feel stiff for up to 30 minutes after you wake up. This does not apply if you have had a recent injury in that area.

- To diagnose your condition, your health care professional will examine you and ask about your symptoms. You will *not* need an x-ray or a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan if you are age 40 or older and have symptoms typical of osteoarthritis. This is because osteoarthritis is more common in this age group, and an x-ray or MRI will not explain your symptoms or help in making a diagnosis. Initial decisions about your treatment can usually be based on the examination and how your symptoms are affecting your life.

## Your Care Plan

- Your health care professionals should do a comprehensive assessment that covers your overall health. You should also talk together about how your osteoarthritis affects your energy, mood, sleep, work, hobbies, family, and social life.
- This information should be used to develop a care plan outlining how you and your health care professionals will work together to improve your symptoms and your ability to keep doing your usual activities.

## Learning to Manage Your Osteoarthritis

### Education

- Your health care professionals should help you learn about your osteoarthritis and how to manage it. They may provide this information directly or refer you to education programs in your community. You should receive this information when you are first diagnosed and again as your needs change.
- Each person will need different types of information, but there are key things everyone with osteoarthritis needs to know. Your health care professionals should talk with you about the importance of being physically active, doing specific exercises, and managing your weight to help reduce your pain and other symptoms. They should also show you how to protect your joints and prevent injury while being physically active (for example, by taking short breaks to allow the joint to rest).

### Your Self-Management Plan

- Your health care professionals should work with you to create a self-management plan. This is the part of your care plan that focuses on your role in your care. Your self-management plan is where you can set goals for living with osteoarthritis, create action plans, solve problems that arise, and chart your progress.
- Your plan should include information about how to access local services such as exercise classes, weight-management programs, and support groups.

- Depending on your needs, your plan might also include information about physical aids such as suitable shoes, leg braces, and hand grips. These things can help you stay active and function well.

### **Therapeutic Exercise**

- If you have osteoarthritis in your hip or knee, doing specific types of exercises can reduce your pain and improve your ability to move. Your health care professionals should provide you with an individualized exercise program or refer you to a specialist who can do this.
- Your exercise program should target the muscles in your abdomen, back, and legs. It should include exercises to improve your balance and agility (ability to move with ease), strengthen your muscles, and improve neuromuscular control or “muscle memory” (training your muscles to move in healthy patterns).
- To benefit from this exercise, your health care professionals should show you how to do it properly and safely and how to gradually do more challenging exercises and increase the amount you can do.

### **Physical Activity**

- In addition to your therapeutic exercise program, your health care professionals should encourage you to be physically active every day. Even a small amount of activity is good. Regular physical activity can reduce the pain, aching, and stiffness related to your osteoarthritis and improve your overall health. Walking, biking, yoga, Tai Chi, swimming, aqua-fit, and walking in a pool are activities that are gentler on the joints.
- If you feel pain when you are active, it does not mean you are damaging your joints. If an activity does make your symptoms worse, your health care professionals should show you how to modify it or recommend other activities.
- You should aim to do as much physical activity as you can tolerate. A good target is at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Brisk walking, biking, and vacuuming your home are examples of moderate activity. Examples of vigorous activity are faster-paced walking, swimming laps, and carrying heavy loads such as a backpack or groceries.
- If you find that target is too hard, you can start small and gradually increase the amount of physical activity you do each day. Your health care professionals should work with you on a plan to reach your goals, or refer you to community programs that can help.

## Weight Management

- Being overweight can make joint pain and mobility worse. Losing weight can improve your symptoms. If you have osteoarthritis and are overweight, your health care professionals should offer you help to lose at least 5% to 10% of your body weight. If you are at a healthy weight, they should encourage you to maintain it.
- If you need help, your health care professionals should refer you to a dietitian or weight-management program. They can support you with information and advice on things like how eating and exercise work together to affect your weight and how to stay motivated and reach your weight-loss goals.

## Pain Medication

- If things like exercise and weight management are not working well enough to control your symptoms, your primary care provider (a family doctor or nurse practitioner) should offer you options for pain-relieving medication. If you decide to use pain medication, it is important to continue using other non-drug treatments as well. You and your primary care provider should also make a plan to review your use of medication after a certain time.
- Your primary care provider should first offer you a cream you rub over the joint or an injection into the joint. If those don't work for you, you may be offered over-the-counter pills (such as acetaminophen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) or prescription pills.
- You should not be offered an opioid medication, such as oxycodone, as a routine way to treat your osteoarthritis pain. These drugs have serious risks including addiction, overdose, and death. For more information, please see our patient reference guide, *Opioid Prescribing for Chronic Pain*.

## Surgery

- If you have tried to manage your symptoms using the treatments described in this guide, and your osteoarthritis symptoms are still having a significant negative impact on your life, your health care professionals may suggest you see a surgeon to see if you could benefit from surgery to realign or replace your painful joint. Joint replacement can greatly reduce pain and improve function for people severely affected by osteoarthritis.
- If you have knee osteoarthritis, your surgeon should not offer you a treatment called arthroscopy. In this procedure, a tube-like device is inserted into a joint to examine and treat it. However, arthroscopy should not be used to treat *knee osteoarthritis* because it does not change the progression of osteoarthritis or improve people's quality of life.

*Draft—do not cite. Report is a work in progress and could change following public consultation.*

You and your care providers should be aware that some treatments and programs described in this guide are not funded publicly, and you may need to pay for these services directly or through private insurance.

We know that osteoarthritis is painful and can affect your life in many ways. Your health care professionals will work with you to help improve your quality of life and help you meet your goals.

Everybody is different, and some statements may not apply in your situation. If you have questions about your care, **it is important to speak with your health care professionals.**

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## Looking for more information?

Please contact us at [qualitystandards@hqontario.ca](mailto:qualitystandards@hqontario.ca) or 1-866-623-6868 if you have any questions or feedback about this patient/resident reference guide.

A more detailed version of this quality standard, written for health care professionals, is available on our website. You can find it at [hqontario.ca](http://hqontario.ca).

## About Health Quality Ontario

Health Quality Ontario is the provincial advisor on the quality of health care. We are motivated by a single-minded purpose: **Better health for all Ontarians.**

Our quality standards are concise sets of statements outlining what quality care looks like for conditions where there are large variations in how care is delivered, or where there are gaps between the care provided in Ontario and the care patients should receive. They are based on the best available evidence and are developed in collaboration with clinical experts from across the province, and patients and caregivers with lived experience with the condition being discussed.

For more information about Health Quality Ontario and our quality standards, visit: **hqontario.ca**.

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