

Keywords: types of arthritis

Problem: With more than 100 conditions affecting the joints and surrounding tissue, it can be challenging differentiating the different types of arthritis.

Solution: This article provides a brief overview of four common types of arthritis and how to differentiate between each one.

Differentiating 4 Common Types of Arthritis

Arthritis is becoming a disease of the masses. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), arthritis is the leading cause of disability, chronic pain and activity limitations. More than 53 million American adults are diagnosed with some form of arthritis. Many of these people depend on opioids to cope with the pain. In 2015, over 55% of all-cause opioid prescriptions in the U.S. were for arthritic pain.

More than 100 conditions affect the joints and surrounding tissue. So, it can be challenging to distinguish between different types. This article briefly overviews four common types of arthritis and how to differentiate between them.

Key Takeaways

- Inflammation in the joints robs people of pleasure and limits activity. Arthritis affects more than 50 million people nationwide.
- Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. Cartilage damage and bone irregularities cause joint stiffness, swelling and aching.
- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and psoriatic arthritis (PsA) are common autoimmune conditions. Unlike PsA, RA presents with periods of flares and remission.
- Psoriatic arthritis affects approximately 30% of people with psoriasis. Scaly, inflamed patches on the skin help clinicians identify this type of arthritis.
- Gout is excruciating. It is caused by hyperuricemia and typically presents in the big toe. Like RA, gout is associated with flares and remission.

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA), or degenerative joint disease, is the most common type of arthritis. It often occurs in the hands, hips and knees. The cartilage in the joint erodes, causing the underlying bone structure to change. This condition usually begins slowly and progressively worsens. OA affects over 32.5 million Americans.

Signs and symptoms

Cartilage damage and bone irregularities cause bothersome symptoms. Joint stiffness leads to decreased range of motion and flexibility. Joint swelling and inflammation cause an achy feeling, often progressing to intense pain.

Risk factors

Certain people are at greater risk of developing OA. These individuals present with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Joint injury or overuse
- 65 or older
- Female gender
- Obesity
- Family history of osteoarthritis

Clinicians use a physical exam, history review, lab tests and X-ray imaging to diagnose osteoarthritis.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks healthy cells, causing inflammation and chronic tissue damage. RA usually assaults the lining of the joints, but it can also affect the lungs, heart and eyes. Unlike OA, rheumatoid arthritis typically impacts more than one joint. The etiology of RA is unknown, making prevention challenging.

Signs and symptoms

Like most arthritis, RA presents with pain, aching and stiffness in the joint. However, patients with RA experience times of **intensified symptoms (flares) and periods of lessened symptoms (remission)**. Typical signs associated with rheumatoid arthritis are the following:

- Pain, aching, stiffness, swelling and tenderness in *more than one joint*
- Mirroring symptoms on both sides of the body
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Fatigue

Physicians diagnose RA in the same manner as osteoarthritis, using physical assessment, history review, lab tests and X-ray imaging. It is vitally important to diagnose RA within six months of symptom onset. Early intervention can slow or even stop the disease progression, lessening joint damage.

Psoriatic arthritis

Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) is an autoimmune condition that affects joints and their entheses. The term entheses refers to where ligaments and tendons connect to the bone. Approximately **30% of people with psoriasis, a chronic skin condition, will develop psoriatic arthritis.**

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of PsA vary significantly. However, some common signs of PsA include the following:

- Scaly, inflamed patches of skin commonly observed on the scalp, elbows or knees
- Enthesitis, which is tenderness or swelling over tendons
- Joint stiffness that is worse after rest
- Joint pain
- Fatigue
- Significant swelling of the entire finger or toe
- Nail changes
- Eye inflammation or vision changes

No definitive exam to diagnose psoriatic arthritis exists. Physicians rely on clinical observation and the process of elimination to diagnose PsA. Though there is no cure, many therapies slow disease progression, reduce pain and preserve range of motion.

Gout

Gout is a type of arthritis *caused by hyperuricemia*. Patients typically experience symptoms in one joint at a time. Gout often affects the **joint of the big toe**. However, people can get gout in the knee, ankle or other toe joints. Gout symptoms present suddenly and typically last a few days or weeks. Like RA, gout also presents with flares and remission. Gout flares are extremely painful, and a remission can last weeks to years.

Symptoms and risk factors

Unlike the aforementioned types of arthritis, gout presents with excruciating, sharp pain. Patients report heat, swelling and redness at the affected site. Obese men with the following comorbidities are more likely to develop gout:

- Congestive heart failure
- Hypertension
- Diabetes
- Poor kidney function
- Metabolic syndrome

Individuals taking diuretics have an increased risk of gout. Consuming large quantities of alcohol, fructose and red meat predisposes individuals to hyperuricemia. A lab test performed during a flare-up will show uric acid crystals in the affected joint.

Promoting pain-free days with quality care

Arthritis is painful and can be debilitating. Many people struggle daily to cope with aching joints. Others are grateful for times of remission but dread inevitable flare-ups. With proper diagnosis and treatment, patients can return to an active life.

Joint health is vital to overall wellness. **Our staff offers invaluable expertise and knowledgeable counsel.** If you want a partner you can count on, we are here. We would be honored to be your partner in care. Click the "Refer" button to begin working together.

Resources

"Gout." CDC: Arthritis, 2023, Gout | CDC.

"Psoriatic Arthritis." NIH: National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, 2021, Psoriatic Arthritis Symptoms and Diagnosis | NIAMS.

"Rheumatoid Arthritis." CDC: Arthritis, 2022, Rheumatoid Arthritis | CDC.

"Osteoarthritis." CDC: Arthritis, 2023, Osteoarthritis | CDC.

"Prevalence of Diagnosed Arthritis — United States, 2019–2021." CDC: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), 2023, Prevalence of Diagnosed Arthritis — United States, 2019–2021 | MMWR.