

# Arthritis

## What is arthritis?

The term arthritis is commonly used to describe two distinctly different conditions.

- **Rheumatoid arthritis** is a systemic disease that affects the whole body. It involves inflammation in the lining of the joints, which causes pain, stiffness, warmth, redness and swelling, and often results in deformities of the joints.
- **Osteoarthritis** is commonly referred to as a degenerative joint disease, as it is thought to be caused by the wear and tear joints experience over time. It affects the main weight-bearing joints: hips, knees and lower back. Predisposing risk factors include:

- § past injuries to a joint;
- § older age.
- § being overweight;
- § congenital bone and joint deformities;
- § poor posture

It is important to get an accurate diagnosis. Medical management of both conditions involves the use of medications to relieve inflammation and decrease pain. For rheumatoid arthritis there is also a range of disease-modifying drugs.

## How do physiotherapists help?

Physiotherapists play an important role in helping you maintain muscle strength and improve the range of movement of your joints. They may give you a tailored exercise for a specific joint or recommend a general exercise programme to maintain fitness and prevent permanent stiffness. Often specific equipment (e.g. TENs - a machine that produces a gentle electrical stimulation), is used to help relieve pain. Exercise in water (hydrotherapy), is often recommended as it does not cause stress to the joints.

Suitable walking aids (e.g. walking sticks) may be provided to assist you if required and in acute episodes of rheumatoid arthritis splints are often provided to rest the joint and relieve pain.

## For further information on arthritis

Arthritis New Zealand [www.arthritis.org.nz](http://www.arthritis.org.nz)