

Symptom: Joint Pain

What is it?

Joint pain is one of the more common symptoms that prompts people to seek help from a healthcare provider. Joint pain can be experienced as aching, dull, sharp, or burning, and can affect one joint or multiple joints. It can be acute and come on suddenly, or can be a chronic condition. Joint pain can be due to a condition localized in the joints, or a symptom of a systemic health condition. For some, joint pain can be debilitating and have a significant impact on quality of life.

What causes it?

The possible causes of joint pain are extensive, which is why seeking help and having a thorough evaluation of your symptoms is important. Some of the possible causes of joint pain include:

- Osteoarthritis (For more information about osteoarthritis, see <https://haeshealthsheets.com/osteoarthritis/>)
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Other forms of inflammatory arthritis (including psoriatic arthritis, Lupus, ankylosing spondylitis)
- Infections (such as viruses, Lyme disease, Strep, Sexually transmitted infections)
- Crystal-induced arthritis such as gout
- Soft tissue conditions (affecting ligaments, cartilage, bursitis, tendonitis, iliotibial band)
- Fibromyalgia
- Hypothyroidism
- Referred pain (such as nerve pain due to spine condition)
- Ehlers-Danlos syndrome
- And many others!

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you questions about your joint pain and any accompanying symptoms. The potential causes can sometimes be narrowed based on the following details:

- One joint or multiple joints affected
- Symmetrical or asymmetrical
- Acute or chronic pain
- Presence of stiffness
- Swelling or warmth of the joints

- Worse in the morning or evening
- Associated symptoms (such as fever, fatigue, rash, hair loss, dry eyes, swollen lymph nodes, mouth ulcers, back pain)
- Any prior injuries

Your healthcare provider will examine your joints looking for swelling, warmth, tenderness, loss of range of motion, or instability. They may also perform a more thorough exam to assess for any signs of the above conditions.

Lab testing is sometimes done if there is concern for systemic conditions such as rheumatologic or autoimmune conditions, infections, thyroid disease, or gout. A sampling of fluid from a joint is occasionally indicated when looking for certain infections, gout, or inflammation.

X-rays of the joints may be performed, though not always necessary. Keep in mind that X-rays can be normal in many situations despite having a significant joint problem. An MRI of the joint is considered when assessing for certain soft tissue conditions, such as ligament or cartilage injuries.

Treatment Options

Treatment of joint pain depends on the particular diagnosis.

- Some of the treatments that may be considered include:
- Rest and ice
- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Physical therapy
- Joint braces
- Joint injections
- Medications targeted to particular conditions
- Surgical treatment

Some individuals also benefit from referral to Orthopedic surgeons or Rheumatologists.

Fatphobia in Treatment

When seeking help from healthcare providers for joint pain, fat people are often told that their weight is the cause of their joint pain, and that weight loss is the primary treatment. Diagnostic tests are not always performed when indicated, and joint conditions often go misdiagnosed or undiagnosed among people in larger bodies. Even when an appropriate diagnosis is made, targeted treatment for the condition is often not offered. Healthcare providers typically prescribe weight loss irrespective of the joint condition, which is ineffective, harmful, and not an evidence-based treatment. In some cases, healthcare providers recommend exercise in order to lose weight for certain joint conditions that can actually be made worse by exercise and should instead be treated with rest. You can read more about why we don't recommend weight loss here:

<https://haeshealthsheets.com/why-we-dont-recommend-intentional-weight-loss/>

Overall

Joint pain is a common symptom in people of all sizes, and people of all sizes deserve the same ethical, evidence-based treatment, which includes proper diagnostic tests and appropriate interventions (with a reminder that weight loss does not qualify as an ethical, evidence-based medical intervention). If you are experiencing weight stigma in your treatment, it may be helpful to ask “what would you do for a thin person with this condition” and then request that.