

Using meds to manage your arthritis pain: An overview

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Millions of Americans suffer from arthritis, and many reach for

medication to ease their joint pain and inflammation.

The options might seem overwhelming, though. Here, the Arthritis Foundation offers some suggestions for meds that can be purchased at a local drug store or filled with a doctor's prescription, whether your pain is caused by normal wear and tear (osteoarthritis) or inflammatory disease.

Over-the-counter meds

Some of the best over-the-counter (OTC) medications for controlling [arthritis pain](#) are acetaminophen, ibuprofen, naproxen and acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin), better known by [brand names](#) like Tylenol, Advil, Motrin, Aleve or Anacin.

Ibuprofen, naproxen and aspirin are nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

While those are pills, it's also possible to get an NSAID in topical form, like diclofenac gel (Voltaren). Other OTC creams for arthritis contain salicylate, capsaicin, camphor or menthol as the active ingredient.

While acetaminophen (Tylenol) is often used to treat osteoarthritis, NSAIDs are typically used for both inflammatory arthritis and osteoarthritis, according to the foundation.

Acetaminophen offers only limited help with inflammatory arthritis because it doesn't control the disease or prevent joint damage, the foundation says.

Diclofenac gel and topical capsaicin might also be used in combination with oral medications to relieve pain. Only limited evidence supports using topical salicylate, camphor or menthol to treat osteoarthritis pain.

A doctor or pharmacist can offer more information on these medications.

How long will you need arthritis meds?

You may need to use these medications regularly if you feel osteoarthritis pain most of the time. If it's not continuous, just stop when you feel better.

Inflammatory arthritis like [rheumatoid arthritis](#) will likely require life-long treatment. Inflammatory arthritis typically requires using not just NSAIDs but disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs, or DMARDs, such as methotrexate.

Prescription medications

A number of different [prescription medications](#) also treat stronger osteoarthritis pain. These include tramadol and other opioids. These may also be prescribed for short-term [inflammatory arthritis](#).

A doctor may prescribe tramadol for arthritis of the knee and hip when a patient can't take acetaminophen or NSAIDs. It may also be used along with other medications.

Opioids are considered second-line medications reserved for moderate to severe knee and hip osteoarthritis pain that hasn't responded to other treatments. Their adverse effects—including the risk of addiction—limit their use, but they may be a safer option than NSAIDs in [elderly patients](#), according to the Arthritis Foundation.

Duloxetine—an antidepressant and nerve pain [medication](#)—is a second-line agent that may be used to treat arthritis of the knee. It can also be

used as an add-on medication.

Most of these medications come in pill form. One opioid medication, fentanyl (Duragesic), is administered by a patch on the skin. But this is not routinely used to manage [arthritis](#) pain, the foundation noted in a news release.

More information: The U.S. National Institute on Aging has more on [osteoarthritis](#).

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