

# Painful truth about knee osteoarthritis: Why inactivity may be more complex than we think

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People with knee OA unconsciously believe that activity may be dangerous to their condition, despite medical advice telling them otherwise. Credit: "Best Walking Shoes for Knee Pain for Women" by gm.esthermax is licensed under

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Knee osteoarthritis (OA) is a common cause of pain and joint stiffness. And while [physical activity is known to ease symptoms](#), only one in 10 people regularly exercise.

Understanding what contributes to patients' inactivity is the focus of a [world first study](#) from the University of South Australia. Here, researchers have found that people with knee OA unconsciously believe that activity may be dangerous to their condition, despite medical advice telling them otherwise.

The study, published in the journal *Pain*, found that of those surveyed, 69% of people with knee [pain](#) had stronger implicit (unconscious) beliefs that [exercise](#) was dangerous than the average person without pain.

It's an interesting finding that not only highlights the conflicted nature of pain and exercise, but also that what people say and what people think, deep down, may be entirely different things.

Lead researcher, and UniSA Ph.D. candidate based at SAHMRI, Brian Pulling, says the research provides valuable insights for clinicians treating people with knee OA.

"Research shows that [physical activity](#) is good for people with [knee](#) OA, but most people with this condition do not move enough to support joint or general health," Pulling says.

"To understand why people with OA might not be active, research

studies typically use questionnaires to assess fear of moving. But unfortunately, questionnaires are limited—what we feel deep down (and how our system naturally reacts to something that is threatening) may be different to what we report. And we still know that many people are avoiding exercise, so we wanted to know why."

To assess this, the researchers developed a tool that can detect and evaluate people's implicit beliefs about exercise; that is, whether they unconsciously think activity is dangerous for their condition.

"We found that that even among those who said they were not fearful about exercise, they held unconscious beliefs that movement was dangerous," Pulling says.

"Our research shows that people have complicated beliefs about exercise, and that they sometimes say one thing if asked directly yet hold a completely different implicit belief.

"People are not aware that what they say doesn't match what they choose on the new task; they are not misrepresenting their beliefs.

"This research suggests that to fully understand how someone feels about an activity, we must go beyond just asking directly, because their implicit beliefs can sometimes be a better predictor of actual behavior than what people report. That's where our tool is useful."

The online implicit association test presents a series of words and images to which a participant must quickly associate with being either safe or dangerous. The tool intentionally promotes instant responses to avoid deliberation and other influencing factors (such as responding how they think they should respond).

Associate Professor Tasha Stanton says that the new tool has the

potential to identify a group of people who may have challenges increasing their activity levels and undertaking exercise.

"What people say and what people do are often two different things, Assoc Prof Stanton says.

"Having access to more accurate and insightful information will help [health professionals](#) better support their patients to engage with activity and exercise. It may also open opportunities for pain science education, exposure-based therapy, or cognitive functional therapy...things that would not usually be considered for someone who said that they were not scared to exercise."

Researchers are now looking to see if implicit beliefs are directly associated with behavior and are asking for people to complete the [Implicit Association Test](#) (takes seven minutes). At the end of the test participants are given their results in comparison to the rest of the population.

**More information:** Brian W. Pulling et al, People with painful knee osteoarthritis hold negative implicit attitudes towards activity, *Pain* (2024). [DOI: 10.1097/j.pain.0000000000003210](https://doi.org/10.1097/j.pain.0000000000003210)

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