

# TIPS TO REDUCE AND TREAT JOINT PAIN WITHOUT SURGERY





Joint pain is very common. Often, minor joint pains—such as in the knee or wrist—will go away on their own. But more significant and chronic discomfort may require active treatment. In many cases, joint pain is caused by arthritis; in other cases you may experience joint pain due to an injury or disease.

Joint pain will commonly impact the knees, hips, wrists, and fingers—but you can experience pain in just about any joint in your body!

“It’s true that in some cases, addressing the root cause of that pain may require surgery,” says Dr. John Leupold, an orthopedic surgeon at Northwest Iowa Bone, Joint, and Sports Surgeons. “However, for most people, surgery is not the first treatment option your provider will consider.”

Instead, your joint pain treatment will start conservatively. These non surgical interventions can help you address your pain and get back to the daily activities you love.





## Identifying the Cause of Joint Pain

Your joint pain treatment plan will depend significantly on the cause of your discomfort. In order to identify that cause, your provider may conduct a physical examination as well as diagnostic imaging (such as an X-ray, CT scan, or more).

An accurate diagnosis is necessary because joint soreness and pain can be caused by a wide variety of issues, including the following:

- Osteoarthritis - A common condition in which the cartilage around a joint wears away, creating pain as your joint bones begin to grind against one another.
- Rheumatoid Arthritis - Distinct from other forms of arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis occurs due to swelling and inflammation which can harm and distort joints and bones.
- Tendonitis - The tendons which surround your muscles and joints can sometimes grow inflamed or damaged, causing pain in the joint area.
- Infections - Joint pain is a common symptom of many viral infections, including common colds and the flu.
- Overuse - In some cases, you can strain a joint by overusing it. This most often occurs around the hips, knees, shoulders, and elbows.
- Broken Bones and Sprains - Injuries to your joints can often result in significant pain. Tendons can become sprained or joint bones can break. This will often require medical intervention to properly heal.

Depending on the root cause of your joint pain, your provider may recommend rest, medication, or physical therapy (in some cases, a combination of all three). “Most treatment plans will begin conservatively,” says Dr. Chris Rierson, an orthopedic surgeon at Northwest Iowa Bone, Joint, and Sports Surgeons. “We try to use the least amount of intervention that your symptoms call for.”





## How to Reduce Joint Pain

There are several ways patients can reduce their joint pain. “There is no “best” approach, as it will depend most significantly on your body, your joints, and the level of your pain,” says Dr. Leupold. However, in general, the following treatments and therapies may be tried to help alleviate your pain.

### Rest

In some cases, injuries are caused by overworking certain joints. The first treatment option will be resting those joints as much as possible.

However, this does not mean you should remain sedentary. Spending more time on the couch or in bed can effectively slow down your recovery period. This means you should consider alternative routines. For example, if you’re an avid swimmer experiencing shoulder pain, try going for a vigorous walk instead. Likewise, if you’re a regular runner dealing with knee pain, taking your kayak out on the lake can be a great alternative.

The idea is to give certain joints a break—but not to become sedentary, as that can make your joint pain worse.



## Ice, Heat, and RICE

Some types of joint pain respond really well to heat; others respond quite nicely to cold. You can ask your provider whether you should be using hot packs or cold packs to help comfort your joint aches.

Whether you use hot or cold, you should follow the same basic protocol: wrap the hot or cold pack in a layer of fabric (such as a tea towel) and place the pack on your skin. You should not keep the pack in contact with your skin for more than 15-20 minutes (you can always follow the 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off method). Do this several times a day.

Icing your joint pain is often part of a broader treatment technique called RICE, which stands for Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation—all designed to help minimize swelling and inflammation in the tissues around your joints.

## Gentle Exercise

“When you experience joint pain, you tend to limit your activity,” says Dr. Rierson. “This can lead to weak and stiff joints over time. As a result, we will often recommend gentle and light activities and exercises.”

This could include exercise routines such as yoga and vigorous stretching. But it may also include hiking, going for a walk around your neighborhood, or going for a swim. If you have a gym membership, you can use specific machines designed to be low impact.

The general idea, however, is to make sure you’re getting in movement without putting strain on your hurting joints (so if you’re experiencing knee pain, don’t go for a run). But staying active can keep your joints from tightening up and becoming more painful.





## Supportive Devices

Sometimes your joints just need a little bit of help—especially if they’re healing! Your orthopedic specialist may recommend you start wearing a supportive device to help take some strain off your joint. These devices can include:

- A soft brace or a hard brace
- An orthopedic wrap
- A cane or other assistive-walking device
- An orthotic support to wear in your shoes

You may be able to purchase some of these devices over-the-counter at your local pharmacy. In other cases, your orthopedic specialist may recommend your device be fitted for your unique physiology (for example, orthotic supports are often molded to your unique foot shape). Talk to your provider about what supportive device you might need to find relief.

## Over-the-Counter Pain Medication

Modern over-the-counter pain medications are especially good at helping you manage joint pain. This is especially true for those over-the-counter medications that also have anti-inflammatory properties, such as ibuprofen.

Taking these over-the-counter medications can be a good way to manage joint pain in the short term. However, these medications can sometimes mask important symptoms. Over the long run, this can lead to worse injuries and bigger health concerns.

The last thing you want to do is ignore your pain—but sometimes a little bit of relief is all you need. That’s why it’s always a good idea to talk to your provider about your pain management needs.



## Physical Therapy

Many people are familiar with physical therapy as an after-surgery activity designed to help you heal faster. And that's true. But physical therapy is also widely used as a way to help prevent the need for surgery in the first place.

When you have joint pain, physical therapy (sometimes in the slightly more specialized form of occupational therapy) will help you improve the strength and flexibility of the muscles that support your joints. Some physical therapy programs also specialize in helping you to alleviate inflammation and reduce the pressure on your joints.

By ensuring that you retain fluid movement and good strength, physical therapy can also help ensure that your injury is unlikely to cause additional pain and injuries.

## Other Medications

In some cases, prescription medications—such as steroid injections—can help you control both swelling and discomfort. Your orthopedic specialist will help you determine when these medications are necessary and beneficial.







## Treating Joint Pain Does Not Always Require Surgery

Some of these treatments can be performed at home without supervision. Others will require input from your orthopedic doctor or your primary care provider. It's important not to ignore joint pain, as this can often make the underlying issue worse. "It's better to treat your joint pain than to 'tough it out,'" says Dr. Leupold.

Treatment of joint pain most often does not require surgery. And in every case, you'll work with your orthopedic physician to treat your joint pain in the way that works best for your symptoms, your body, and your lifestyle.

**Talk to a doctor about your joint pain today!**





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