

Knee Osteoarthritis

Condition: Knee osteoarthritis (OA) is a painful disease of the joint that results from “wear and tear” of the bones and cartilage.

Background: One in four Americans over the age of 45 suffer from OA. Worldwide, OA is a common cause of disability.

Risk Factors: Advanced age is most commonly associated with developing OA. Other important risk factors include obesity, female gender, ethnicity, genetic predisposition, and prior trauma/injury.

History and Symptoms: Patients with knee OA frequently experience pain of gradual onset and morning stiffness lasting less than 30 minutes. Other associated symptoms may include knee clicking, a reduced ability to bend the joint, and changes in the appearance of the knee. Symptoms may worsen over time.

Physical Exam: Your physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician will perform an evaluation of your knee that may include the following:

- 1) Inspection for abnormalities such as skin discoloration, swelling, size, and alignment.
- 2) Pressing different regions to assess for tenderness.
- 3) Bending and straightening of the joint.
- 4) Strength testing of muscles in the area.
- 5) Special physical exam tests to better determine the origin of pain.

Diagnostic Process: X-rays are commonly used to evaluate the severity of knee OA. Other imaging methods that aid in providing a clear diagnosis include ultrasound, or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Your PM&R physician may have advanced training in performing in-office ultrasound. Some patients may require draining of joint fluid or blood testing.

Rehab Management: PM&R physicians use a comprehensive and collaborative approach to managing knee OA. Your rehabilitation may include 1) a physical therapy program that provides education on exercise and activity modification, 2) a healthy nutritional program to encourage weight loss, 3) oral medications, and 4) joint injections. Often, multiple healthcare professionals (your PM&R physician, and physical therapy staff) are involved in your care.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Weight loss and exercise programs may be helpful for patients and families.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.