

Joint Pain and Muscle Strains

At some point in time, you probably have pulled a muscle or twisted something the wrong way. You may even have broken a bone from a fall or other injury of some sort. But sometimes, we experience a lingering pain that doesn't seem to go away on its own. Perhaps you aren't able to identify what is causing the pain.

Sometimes the pain may be so excruciating that you know something is wrong. But other times, the pain might be duller, and it becomes something you get used to and put off getting checked.

The number of things that could cause pain in the muscles and joints can make it difficult to know what is causing the issue and whether or not it is serious. Typically if the pain is localized to the joint, it is a sign of arthritis or some type of injury to the bone.

"When there is evidence of pain that's related to a particular joint, often times it's due to motion. You can detect it right away, and it's very localized to that area. There's swelling of the joint, there's mechanical instability of the joint, and there's redness around the joint," says Dr. Allen Van, an OSF HealthCare orthopedic surgeon.

If you have injured a joint, you most likely will know the cause. The most common cause of joint pain, however, typically stems from arthritis. According to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS), pain, swelling, and stiffness are the primary symptoms of arthritis. Additionally, while most people think of arthritis as something that occurs in older adults, it can occur at any age.

"Typically, wear-and-tear arthritis usually puts you into that category in your late 50s, 60s, or 70s. Traumatic arthritis could occur in the younger population, such as someone who is playing high school football or someone who works all their life as a labor person starting in their 20s or 30s," Dr. Van explains.

While some people believe arthritis is inevitable and may put off seeing a doctor until the pain worsens, this is not advised, as early detection and treatment helps in the long run.

If you get evaluated by a doctor and injury to or deterioration of the joint is not detected, that is when the pain may be caused by an injury to a muscle or ligament.

With these injuries, the nearby joints can sometimes be affected if not treated early on, which is why it may be mistaken for joint pain. Or perhaps you are an athlete or someone who lives an active lifestyle and a wear-and-tear type of injury develops over time. Dr. Van says it is important to pay attention to a few specific things when assessing your pain.

"The key factors are: how long the pain has been going on, whether it is getting better, and what makes it worse. Is it associated with certain activities, like motion or bearing weight? Then an examination can determine if it is soft tissue like ligaments or tendons, or a hip sprain or tendonitis," says Dr. Van.

So, when should you see a doctor?

"I tell patients the pain is usually worrisome if they have pain that is lasting more than two or three days and the pain is unrelenting, it is associated with activities, and it is not improving with rest," Dr. Van advises.

If you are experiencing pain that has not gone away on its own, make an appointment with your primary care provider to be evaluated. If you experienced an injury causing immediate pain that is severe, do not wait. Go to your nearest urgent care or emergency department, or call 911.