

Q. Why do my joints hurt when it's cold outside?

A. You know Old Man Winter is on the way because your knee hurts. Maybe you've predicted the next cold front based on joint-pain flare-ups. Or maybe every time you have aches and pains, the weather changes. Sound familiar? If you think aching joints can predict the weather, you're not alone.

More than a hundred million people living in the United States have pain, including joint pain.¹ Some research shows that sunny days with low humidity can help ease joint pain.² But when the weather changes, there's a spike in online searches about how to manage muscle aches and pains.³ So what's going on when you wake up on a cold and rainy day with joint pain?

Weather-related joint pain: Here's what's happening...

One group of researchers looked at 12 studies about weather and joint pain.⁴ They found that when there's a drop in barometric pressure and the air gets damp, people report more joint pain and swelling. The common thought is that this change in weather can cause tendons, muscles, and tissues to expand. This can lead to joint pain that limits how you move.

But there are still some unknowns about why your joints ache when it's cold outside.

Another group of researchers compared 11 million primary care office visits with rainy days vs. non-rainy days.⁵ The result? There was no link between weather and doctor visits for joint or back pain.



The forecast of joint pain: Fact or fiction?

The idea that weather changes can lead to joint pain has been around for centuries. It may be a myth—at least at the clinical level. So why do so many people feel weather and pain go together? One idea is that the mind is more likely to lump unhappy events, like cold weather and joint pain, together, which is what researchers suggested in the rainy day vs. non-rainy day study. On the other hand, they might be related.

Some studies have found that weather can affect the body. For example, cold weather can raise blood pressure. And people may feel more pain when air pressure drops or when it's humid right after they've had surgery on their bones or muscles. A 2019 study, *Cloudy with a Chance of Pain*, saw a clear link between pain and wind, moisture, and pressure.

More studies are needed to know for sure if weather causes joint pain—and if so, why. Some health problems increase the risk of joint pain, such as high blood sugar, heart disease, arthritis, and being overweight.

ASK THE WELLNESS DOCTOR

If you do have joint pain and swelling, here are some things you can do:

- ✓ **Talk to your doctor.** You may have a health condition linked to joint pain. Medicine, physical therapy, and other treatment options can help.
- ✓ **Manage your weight.** Being overweight or obese raises the risk for developing joint pain in your knees. Maintain a healthy weight or lose weight if you need to.
- ✓ **Be active.** Aim for 30 minutes a day of moderate physical activity. Even a little exercise can make a difference. Walk. Bike. Swim. Climb stairs. Being active can help prevent joint pain and stiffness.

References

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