SYMPTOM

Limited range of motion

Limited range of motion means a joint cannot move as far as expected.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
My joint will not move as far as usual

WHERE IT IS FELT
Any joint, often the shoulder, knee, hip, neck, or fingers

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injury, joint inflammation, muscle tightness

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A hot, swollen joint with fever or sudden severe pain

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, based on the cause and affected tissues

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Movement stays limited, worsens, or interferes with daily activities

Overview

Limited range of motion means you cannot fully bend, straighten, or turn a joint. The restriction may be mild, or the joint may barely move. Pain can limit movement, but a joint can also feel stiff or blocked without much pain.

It can affect one joint or several. It may begin suddenly after an injury or develop gradually. Limited movement is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Possible causes include swelling, tight muscles, arthritis, tendon problems, and changes inside the joint.

Your usual movement also depends on age, flexibility, past injuries, and the joint involved. A small difference between the two sides is not always abnormal.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice that the joint stops before reaching its usual position. Everyday tasks can become difficult. For example, you may struggle to reach overhead, turn your head, make a fist, climb stairs, or fully straighten a knee.

The joint may feel:

A clinician may compare active movement , which is how far you can move the joint yourself, with passive movement , which is how far it moves with help. This difference can offer clues about whether the problem involves pain, weakness, muscles, tendons, or the joint itself.

- Stiff, tight, painful, or weak
- Swollen or warm
- Caught, locked, or as if something blocks it
- More restricted after rest or in the morning
- Painful only near the end of a movement

Common causes

Common causes include minor injuries and overuse. A sprain affects ligaments, which connect bones. A strain affects a muscle or tendon. Pain and swelling after either injury can temporarily reduce movement.

Keeping a joint still because it hurts can also cause stiffness. Muscles and other tissues may tighten, especially after a period in a cast, sling, or bed.

Osteoarthritis can gradually reduce movement as cartilage and other joint tissues change. It often causes stiffness after rest and pain with activity. Tendon irritation and bursitis can make certain movements painful. A bursa is a small, fluid-filled cushion near a joint.

Less common causes include frozen shoulder, inflammatory arthritis, scar tissue after surgery, or a piece of cartilage or bone interfering with movement. Nerve or muscle conditions may make movement difficult because of weakness rather than joint stiffness.

Urgent causes include a joint infection, fracture, dislocation, or a serious injury affecting nerves or blood flow. Sudden difficulty moving one side of the body may be a sign of a stroke rather than a joint problem.

When to seek medical care

Arrange an appointment if the restriction lasts, keeps returning, becomes worse, or affects sleep, work, walking, or personal care. You should also book an assessment if you have ongoing swelling, morning stiffness, unexplained weakness, or several affected joints.

Seek same-day medical care if:

Call emergency services after an injury if the limb looks deformed, becomes pale or cold, or

develops severe numbness. Do not try to force a deformed joint back into place.

Get emergency help for sudden arm or leg weakness, facial drooping, trouble speaking, loss of balance, or a sudden severe headache. These may be stroke symptoms.

- A joint becomes hot, swollen, very painful, and difficult to move
- Joint symptoms occur with fever or feeling generally unwell
- You cannot use or bear weight on the joint after an injury
- The joint suddenly locks and cannot bend or straighten
- Pain and swelling increase quickly

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the restriction began, whether there was an injury, and which movements are difficult. Mention pain, swelling, fever, numbness, weakness, morning stiffness, previous surgery, and any joints with similar symptoms.

During the examination, they may watch you move and then gently move the joint for you. They may check tenderness, warmth, swelling, strength, sensation, and blood flow. The affected side may be compared with the other side.

Tests are not always needed. An X-ray can show fractures and some changes in bone or joint space. Ultrasound or MRI may be used to examine tendons, muscles, fluid, and other soft tissues. Blood tests or a sample of joint fluid may be needed when infection or inflammatory arthritis is possible.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is limiting movement. A minor soft-tissue injury may improve with temporary activity changes and gradual movement. Arthritis, a significant tendon injury, infection, fracture, or nerve problem may need specific treatment.

If there was no major injury or urgent warning sign, you can:

Non-prescription pain medicine may help some people. Follow the label and ask a pharmacist or clinician whether it is suitable if you have other health conditions, take other medicines, or are pregnant.

Physical therapy may help restore movement, strength, and function. Other treatment can include a brace, injection, or surgery, but these are used only for selected causes.

- Reduce activities that clearly worsen the pain
- Use a wrapped cold pack for recent pain or swelling
- Try gentle warmth for stiffness without new swelling
- Move the joint gently within a comfortable range
- Avoid forceful stretching or prolonged complete rest

What to expect

Recovery depends on the cause and the tissues involved. Mild stiffness after a small injury may improve over days or weeks. Arthritis, frozen shoulder, and recovery after surgery can take longer and may improve gradually over months.

Movement often returns in stages rather than all at once. Seek follow-up if progress stops, the joint becomes less mobile, or new swelling, weakness, numbness, or locking develops.

Common questions

Should I stretch a stiff joint?

Gentle movement can help some types of stiffness. Stop if stretching causes sharp pain, increasing swelling, numbness, or a feeling that the joint is blocked. Do not force a recently injured or deformed joint.

Is limited range of motion always caused by arthritis?

No. Injuries, swelling, muscle tightness, tendon problems, pain, and periods of inactivity are also possible causes. The timing and other symptoms help narrow the possibilities.

Why can someone else move the joint farther than I can?

If assisted movement is better than movement you perform yourself, pain, weakness, or a tendon or nerve problem may be involved. If both are restricted, stiffness within or around the joint may be more likely. An examination is needed to interpret this safely.

Can a joint become permanently stiff?

Some conditions can cause lasting restriction, especially after major injury, surgery, or prolonged immobilisation. Early assessment is helpful when movement is worsening or not returning as expected.

Sources

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- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases: Osteoarthritis , National Institutes of Health
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- NHS: Septic arthritis , National Health Service
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