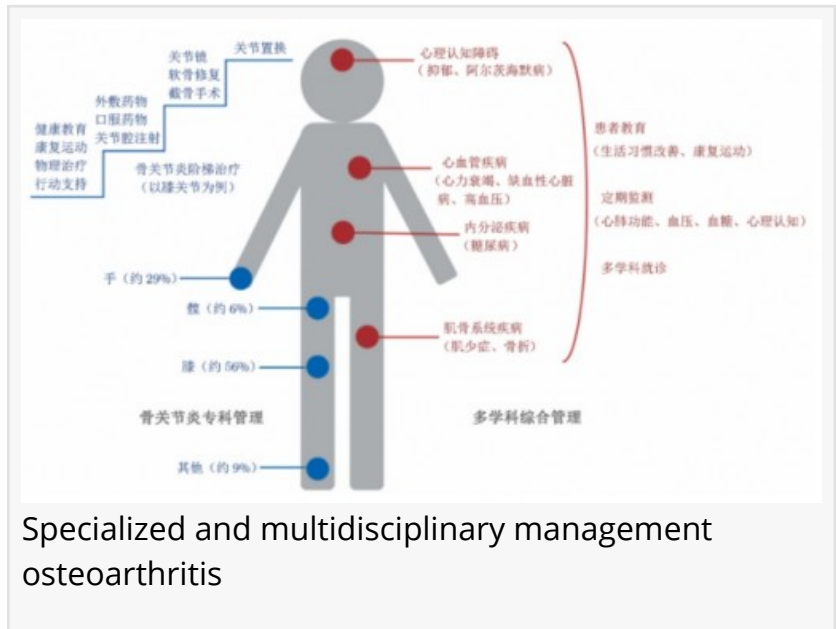


# Beyond joint pain: the hidden harms of osteoarthritis

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Osteoarthritis (OA), long seen as a natural byproduct of aging, is rapidly emerging as a major global health concern. Affecting over 530 million people worldwide, OA is no longer limited to aching joints and creaky knees—it's a complex condition that robs individuals of mobility, independence, and productivity. China bears the heaviest load, with a growing tide of cases linked to its aging population, rising obesity rates, and rural health disparities. This new study paints a stark picture: OA significantly heightens the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cognitive decline. As the burden deepens, the need for early detection and multidisciplinary care becomes ever more urgent.



Once confined to the elderly, Osteoarthritis (OA) now casts a wider net. Increasingly, younger adults—especially those in physically demanding jobs—are being diagnosed with early-onset OA. Sedentary lifestyles and soaring obesity rates have accelerated the disease's advance. In China, where the aging population is surging and healthcare access varies widely, the impact is particularly severe. Rural and mountainous regions, where strenuous labor and limited medical resources intersect, bear the brunt. These trends reveal a complex interplay of socioeconomic and biological factors, underscoring the pressing need to investigate OA's full clinical and societal impact.

In a new study (DOI: [10.12290/xhyxzz.2024-0969](https://doi.org/10.12290/xhyxzz.2024-0969)) published in the [Medical Journal of Peking Union Medical College Hospital](#) (January 2025), researchers from Peking University People's Hospital and the Peking University Arthritis Institute analyzed OA trends using data from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study. Their findings expose a sharp increase in OA-related disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) and underscore China's disproportionately high OA burden. The study brings into focus the disease's escalating scale and the urgent need to shift from

reactive treatment to proactive, system-wide prevention strategies.

Between 1990 and 2019, the number of people living with OA worldwide more than doubled. In 2019, over 130 million Chinese citizens were affected, and projections suggest that figure could rise by 50% by 2044. While OA remains most prevalent among those over 60, younger adults are increasingly being diagnosed—many under the age of 55. The researchers identify obesity, menopause-related hormonal shifts, and physically intensive lifestyles as key risk factors. What's more, OA is rarely an isolated problem: patients face a cascade of comorbidities including heart failure, sarcopenia, fractures, depression, and even Alzheimer's disease. These overlapping conditions complicate treatment and inflate healthcare costs. The study urges a shift toward multidisciplinary care that combines physical therapy, medication, lifestyle coaching, and public education to slow disease progression and enhance quality of life.

"People often think of OA as simply a joint problem, but its effects are systemic and profound," said Professor Lin Jianhao, corresponding author of the study. "With an aging population and increasing obesity, China faces an unprecedented challenge. Our findings emphasize the urgency of early screening, lifestyle interventions, and multidisciplinary care. Managing OA effectively means not only treating pain, but also preventing associated diseases and preserving long-term mobility and mental health."

This study's implications go far beyond orthopedics. As China enters a new era of demographic transformation, OA management must become a national priority. Early interventions like rehabilitation therapy, dietary counseling, and community-level screenings can reduce reliance on invasive surgeries. On a broader scale, investing in rural healthcare infrastructure and launching nationwide education campaigns could significantly ease the burden. Aligning OA prevention efforts with the World Health Organization's Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) may be the most effective path forward to ensure longer, healthier, and more independent lives for millions.

## References

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