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ARTHRITIS

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Arthritis is inflammation of the joints (the points where bones meet) in one or more areas of the body. There are more than 100 different types of arthritis, all of which have different causes and treatment methods. The symptoms of arthritis usually appear gradually but they may also occur suddenly. Arthritis is most commonly seen in adults over the age of 65 but it can also develop in children and teens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, arthritis is more common in women than men and in those that are overweight (CDC).

WHAT CAUSES ARTHRITIS?

Cartilage is a flexible, connective tissue in joints that absorbs the pressure and shock created from movement like running and walking. It also protects the joints and allows for smooth movement.

Some forms of arthritis are caused by a reduction in the normal amount of this cartilage tissue. Osteoarthritis, one of the most common forms of arthritis, is caused by normal wear and tear throughout life; this natural breakdown of cartilage tissue can be exacerbated by an infection or injury to the joints.

The risk of developing osteoarthritis may be higher if you have a family history of the disease. Another common form of arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, occurs when your body's immune system attacks the tissues of the body. These attacks affect the synovium, which secretes a fluid that nourishes the cartilage and lubricates the joints. Rheumatoid arthritis can eventually lead to the destruction of both bone and cartilage inside the joint. The exact cause of the immune system's attacks has not yet been discovered, but scientists have discovered genetic markers that increase your risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis tenfold.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ARTHRITIS?

The most common symptoms of arthritis involve the joints. Joint pain and stiffness, mostly in the morning, are typical signs, along with swelling of the joints. You may also experience a decrease in range of motion of your joints or redness of the skin around the joint.

In the case of rheumatoid arthritis you may feel tired or experience a loss of appetite because of the inflammation caused by your body's attacking immune system. You may also become

anemic (experience decreased red blood cells) or have a slight fever. Severe rheumatoid arthritis can cause joint deformity if left untreated.

HOW IS ARTHRITIS DIAGNOSED?

Diagnosis of arthritis will start with your physician performing a physical exam, during which he or she will check for limited range of motion in the joint, the feeling of fluid around joints, or warm or red joints. Extraction and analysis of your bodily fluids like blood and joint fluid can help your doctor determine what kind of arthritis you have by checking for inflammation levels. Imaging scans such as X-ray, MRI, and CT scans are commonly used to produce an image of your bones and cartilage so your doctor can better determine whether something like a bone spur is the cause of your symptoms.

HOW ARTHRITIS IS TREATED?

The main goal of treatment is to reduce the amount of pain you're experiencing and prevent any additional damage to the joints. Improving your joint function is also important, and you may be prescribed a combination of treatment methods to achieve the best results.

Medication

Medications that can help arthritis symptoms include:

Medications that control pain, like hydrocodone (Vicodin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol), are effective for pain, but don't help decrease inflammation.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) help control both pain and inflammation, but they have been linked to a higher risk of stroke or heart attack. If you take an oral form of NSAIDs, they can upset your stomach.

Menthol or capsaicin creams may be used to impede your joint's pain signal transmission.

If you have rheumatoid arthritis your doctor may put you on corticosteroids or disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) that suppress your immune system.

Surgery

Surgery to have your joint replaced with an artificial one may be an option. This form of surgery is most commonly performed to replace hips and knees. If your arthritis is most severe in your fingers or wrists, your doctor may perform a joint fusion. In this procedure, the ends of your bones are locked together until they heal and become one.

Physical Therapy

Physical therapy involving exercises that help strengthen the muscles around the affected joint is a core component of arthritis treatment. Weight loss and maintaining a healthy

weight can reduce the symptoms in those that have osteoarthritis, and they are also effective in reducing the risk of developing osteoarthritis.

(Written by Brindles Lee Macon)

10 Ways You Can Protect Your Joints

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common form of arthritis, with nearly 27 million Americans living with it today. No longer considered just a consequence of aging, researchers now have several candidates when looking for a cause: musculoskeletal defects, genetic defects, obesity, or injury and overuse. Find more resources for managing OA at the end of this article.

While you may not be able to control a genetic trait or knock knees, there are some definite actions you can take to protect your joints and help prevent OA.

- 1- Maintain your ideal body weight. The more you weigh the more stress you are putting on your joints, especially your hips, knees, back and feet.
- 2- Move your body. Exercise protects joints by strengthening the muscles around them. Strong muscles keep your joints from rubbing against one another, wearing down cartilage.
- 3- Stand up straight. Good posture protects the joints in your neck, back, hips and knees.
- 4- Use the big joints. When lifting or carrying, use largest and strongest joints and muscles. This will help you avoid injury and strain on your smaller joints.
- 5- Pace yourself. Alternate periods of heavy activity with periods of rest. Repetitive stress on joints for long periods of time can accelerate the wear and tear that causes OA.
- 6- Listen to your body. If you are in pain, don't ignore it. Pain after activity or exercise can be an indication that you have overstressed your joints.
- 7- Don't be static. Changing positions regularly will decrease the stiffness in your muscles and joints.
- 8- Forget the weekend warrior. Don't engage in activities your body for which your body isn't prepared. Start new activities slowly and safely until you know how your body will react to them. This will reduce the chance of injury.
- 9- Wear proper safety equipment. Don't leave helmets and wrist pads at home. Make sure you get safety gear that is comfortable and fits appropriately.

10- Ask for help. Don't try to do a job that is too big for you to handle. Get another pair of hands to help out.

Exercise Regularly

Through exercise, you can improve your overall health and fitness, as well as your arthritis symptoms. Exercise can:

Keep joints moving

Strengthen muscles around joints

Keep bones strong and healthy

Help you complete daily activities more easily

Improve your overall health and fitness, including increasing your energy, improving your sleep, controlling your weight, strengthening your heart and improving your self-esteem and sense of well-being.

Regular exercise can also help you effectively manage pain. A physical therapist, occupational therapist, exercise physiologist or doctor can recommend an exercise program for you.

Your program should include range-of-motion (the normal amount your joints can be moved in a certain direction) exercises to keep your joints flexible. It also should include endurance exercise, such as water exercise, walking or riding a stationary bicycle. Endurance exercises help keep your heart, lungs, bones and muscles strong. They help your body work more efficiently and give you more stamina so that you can work longer without tiring as quickly.

Some experts think alternative exercise, such as yoga and tai chi, can be beneficial for people with arthritis. These forms of exercise can improve flexibility, increase muscle strength and help you relax.