

## ARTHRITIS

Affects 1 out of every  
6 Canadians - and  
most are under the  
age of 65!

### Lifestyle Tips

- If you are overweight or obese, modest weight reduction can significantly reduce the stress on your joints and arthritic pain.
- Heat and/or cold application. Heat can reduce stiffness, improve flexibility and relax sore muscles. Cold can provide temporary numbing of pain and reduce inflammation in swollen, hot joints.
- R & R – don't overdo it. Rest: when your arthritis is acting up, take a day off to rest and look for ways to minimize the use of the inflamed joints. Relaxation: de-stressing can improve your pain tolerance.
- Try topical pain relievers such as arthritis creams or gels or the newer anti-inflammatory gel. They don't tend to work as well on the large, deep joints but may provide some temporary relief in other arthritic joints.
- A few sessions with a physical therapist can provide a wealth of information for specific exercises, therapies and recommendations for adaptations and devices that can make day-to-day activities more comfortable and safe.

### What is Arthritis?

*Arthritis* is a term used to describe any condition which involves pain and/or inflammation of one or more joints of the body. There are two common forms of arthritis, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, but gout, lupus, psoriasis, joint infections and many other conditions can also be a form of arthritis. The dominant arthritis symptoms are pain and stiffness, but can also include redness, swelling and reduced range of motion.

A *joint* is the point where two bones meet, however the body is designed to avoid having these two bones actually touch. The end of each bone is covered with a thick, slippery cartilage and the space between the bones is filled with a gelatinous substance called *synovial fluid*. The cartilage and synovial fluid work together to cushion and lubricate the joint, preventing pain and damage to the bones that would occur if they rubbed against each other.

Several things can increase the risk of developing arthritis. There is a hereditary component and you will be more likely to have arthritis if you have family members with it. The risk of getting arthritis also increases with age. Sports, jobs or other activities that put stress on joints can lead to arthritis – and it's important to remember that being overweight or obese significantly increases joint stress! Finally, a history of injury to a joint or a joint deformity has also been linked to the development of arthritis in that joint.

In addition to the discomfort of arthritis, it can take a toll on a person's lifestyle, making it difficult to manage day-to-day activities. Even walking can become a chore. Balance can also become disrupted, increasing the likelihood of falls and fractures.

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## More Lifestyle Tips

Although arthritis is not curable, that doesn't mean that there aren't effective steps you can take to better manage it and reduce the pain and stiffness.

Both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis respond very well to regular exercise to maintain joint function and flexibility – but keep it gentle and low-impact! Walking, swimming, aquasize and biking are good and also help to build the muscles needed to help stabilize weak joints. Tai chi is particularly beneficial and additionally provides improved balance to reduce the risk of falls.

## Alternative Remedies

Many treatments have been tried for arthritis over the centuries, most of which are based in folklore and are unproven or unsafe. Recently, though, some studies are showing modest benefits for some alternative therapies. Osteoarthritis seems to improve with the use of glucosamine, SAmE and acupuncture. Those with rheumatoid arthritis have had some help with plant oils, such as borage, evening primrose and black currant, or fish oil supplements. Physiotherapy and special exercise may also be recommended to help reduce pain and improve mobility.

Remember that even natural remedies have the potential for serious interactions with prescription medications and other medical conditions, so be sure to discuss them, and any other non-prescription products, with your physician and a Medicine Centre pharmacist before you take them.

## Summary

*Arthritis is a collection of joint diseases, the most common of which are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Anyone experiencing pain, swelling and/or stiffness in a joint which lasts more than 2-3 weeks should see a physician for a diagnosis. Early treatment may improve day-to-day functioning. While appropriate drug therapy is available, it is best complimented by physical therapy and lifestyle changes which can reduce symptoms and increase quality of life.*

*Osteoarthritis* is typically the result of wear-and-tear on a joint. Usually, the cartilage covering the ends of a bone thins and disintegrates over time, causing the bones to rub together without any protection. While painful, osteoarthritis does not always include inflammation, although this can happen more frequently with advancing age and in times of overuse. It is most likely to affect weight-bearing joints such as the knees, hips and spine/neck as well as the hands.

*Rheumatoid arthritis* is an autoimmune disease. This means that the body's immune system attacks its own tissues but the reasons for this are not completely understood. In rheumatoid arthritis, the synovial membrane and fluid are initially affected, becoming swollen and hot. Eventually the bone itself can be eroded and the joint deformed. Rheumatoid arthritis usually affects the joints of the fingers and toes and the afflicted person often feels generally unwell, tired and, possibly, feverish.

While there is no cure for either type of arthritis, long term outcomes are improved with early interventions to manage pain, maintain flexibility and prevent bone damage and joint deformities.

## TREATMENT OF OSTEOARTHRITIS

Initial treatment of osteoarthritis is generally with medications. For mild to moderate pain, without inflammation, acetaminophen is the drug of choice. When inflammation is present, NSAIDs (Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs) are used; these can be non-prescription medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen sodium, or prescription medications, such as celecoxib or diclofenac. Severe pain can be treated with narcotics, but these carry the risk of drug dependence. Medications can have side-effects or contraindications, so be sure to talk to your Medicine Centre Pharmacist about the pros and cons of any medications being considered. Some natural options are also available, check out the side bar for more information.

Advanced osteoarthritis may be treated more invasively. Cortisone injections into the joint or injections of "artificial synovial fluid" can provide significant relief. Surgical procedures such as joint replacement or osteotomy may also be considered.

## TREATMENT OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Because rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory disease, drug treatment generally begins with NSAIDs. When these are ineffective, steroids, such as prednisone, are usually the next step – however, these do carry significant risks and side-effects. Some people respond to DMARDs (Disease Modifying Antirheumatic Drugs), such as methotrexate and hydroxychloroquine, or immune suppressants, such as azathioprine and cyclosporine. These medications are usually initiated by specialists and require close monitoring. Physical therapy and some non-drug measures are also important in the treatment of Rheumatoid Arthritis (see side bar).

A promising newer class of drugs, the TNF-alpha inhibitors, such as infliximab and etanercept, are offering hope to some with severe rheumatoid arthritis. However, these medications pose some serious adverse reactions including infections, heart failure and even cancer and warrant a stringent assessment of benefits versus risks.

Surgical options also exist for rheumatoid arthritis. Joint replacement or, possibly, joint fusion can offer relief as well as other surgical procedures for repairing the damaged tendons around a joint to improve stability and function.