

What is osteoarthritis?

Sometimes described as “wear and tear” arthritis, osteoarthritis is very common and affects about 70% of senior citizens. People with osteoarthritis experience pain, stiffness and decreased flexibility in their joints.

Osteoarthritis attacks the cartilage (rubbery tissue covering the ends of bones and cushioning the joints) by roughening its normally smooth surface. Weight bearing joints such as the hips, knees and feet are most susceptible to the disease.

Symptoms

The symptoms of osteoarthritis are painful, stiff and inflamed joints with limited flexibility. Symptoms are usually worse in the morning and improve with movement.

How do I manage osteoarthritis?

Arthritis pain can be managed medically with the use of acetaminophen, aspirin or anti-inflammatories. Alternatives to drugs include supplementation with herbal anti-inflammatories (boswellia, turmeric, ginger) Essential Fatty Acids (Salmon Oil, Flax, Evening Primrose), Vitamin C, Glucosamine and Chondroitin Sulphate and enzymes, to name a few. It is also possible to identify foods that trigger the inflammatory response. Common problem foods include dairy, wheat, red and green peppers, eggplant, potatoes, tomatoes and citrus. Seeing a health care practitioner who can test for food intolerances is often beneficial.

Applying cold packs to swollen joints for 10 minutes several times a day will often relieve acute arthritis pain. Alternating cold and warm packs (10min/10min) can also reduce joint pain. Paraffin baths, often performed by physical therapists and massage therapists, are also relieving. Electrical modalities such as TENS, Ultrasound and IFC current can also be beneficial in controlling pain and inflammation.

Investing in special household appliances, such as jar openers, can make life easier. Avoid grasping or twisting objects, and when lifting remember to distribute weight evenly. Maintaining good posture and resting periodically throughout the day can help alleviate osteoarthritis symptoms. Maintaining a healthy body weight through a healthy diet and a regular exercise routine will also minimize arthritis symptoms by reducing stress on the joints. Keeping joints moving is the key. Receiving therapy from a chiropractor, physical therapist or massage therapist to maintain joint movement will assist in preventing the progression of joint degeneration and loss of range of motion. Your health care practitioner is able to assess your needs and design and supervise a home exercise program for you.

Exercise and osteoarthritis

Many health care professionals now believe that a regular, sensible exercise program can in fact alleviate the symptoms of osteoarthritis. A balanced exercise plan should include all aspects of fitness -- stretching, strength conditioning and aerobic exercise - and should be embarked on gradually. Slow, gentle stretches performed daily will maintain or improve range of motion in affected joints. Improved flexibility has been shown to reduce arthritis pain. Strengthening the muscles surrounding arthritic joints through resistance exercises or weight lifting relieves stress on the joints. Aerobic exercise, such as walking, swimming, water aerobics (particularly when performed in therapy pools) and bicycling benefits the lungs, heart and strengthens major muscle groups. Any exercise plan should be designed or approved by a health care professional.