

What is osteoarthritis?

- Osteoarthritis is caused by the breakdown of the joint cartilage, the tough elastic material that covers and protects the ends of joints. Bits of cartilage may break off and cause pain in the joint.
- Over time the cartilage may wear away entirely. The bones will rub together causing more pain.
- Osteoarthritis may affect any joint but commonly affects hips, knees, hands and spine.

How common is osteoarthritis?

- It is the most common form of arthritis (arthritis refers to a variety of joint problems that cause pain, swelling and/or stiffness).
- Approximately 2.7 million Canadians (1 in 10) are affected by osteoarthritis.
- Osteoarthritis can occur at any age but is more common after the age of 45.

What causes osteoarthritis?

- The exact cause is unknown.
- Factors that increase the risk are:
 - Family history
 - Increasing age
 - Being overweight, especially affecting hips and knees
 - Injuries or repeated use of a joint
 - Complications from another type of arthritis.

How do you know if you have osteoarthritis?

- Symptoms usually develop slowly.
- Joint pain, stiffness and swelling are all possible signs.
- A doctor will make a diagnosis based on your medical history and physical examination. Certain tests such as x-rays may be ordered.

How is osteoarthritis treated?

- Although there is no cure, there are a number of steps you can take to deal with the pain and lead an active life.

Exercise

- Exercise helps reduce pain, prevents further joint damage and maintains a healthy weight.
- Not using a sore joint will cause the muscles around it to become weak and result in pain.

- There are three types of exercise:
 - Range-of-motion: reduces stiffness and helps keep your joints flexible
 - Strengthening: helps maintain or increase your muscle strength
 - Endurance: strengthens your heart, gives you energy and controls your weight. Walking, swimming, cycling are types of endurance exercise.

Heat/Cold

- Heat helps relax aching muscles, joint pain and soreness, for example, a hot shower.
- Cold helps numb an area, for example, an ice pack.

Protect Your Joints

- Pace yourself by alternating heavy or repeated tasks with easy ones or rest.
- Position your body to avoid stress on joints.
- Use helpful devices in your daily tasks such as carts, enlarged handles, canes and grab bars.

Relaxation

- Relaxing the muscles reduces joint pain.
- Relaxation can include deep breathing exercises, listening to music, visualization, prayer, meditation or listening to relaxation tapes.

Medication

- Commonly prescribed medications include:
 - Moderate doses of acetaminophen, ASA and ibuprofen for temporary pain relief.
 - Prescription nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) if you have inflammation (swelling).
- Other prescribed medications are the recently approved cyclooxygenase-2 inhibitors (COX-2) class of medications. Like other NSAIDs, COX-2 NSAIDs have similar effectiveness to older NSAIDs in reducing pain and swelling. COX-2 NSAIDs do not prevent joint damage. They may be used if you are at risk of stomach upset or other gastrointestinal (GI) risk factors.
- Medications that are available without a prescription can be very effective, for example acetaminophen. It is the initial treatment for osteoarthritis and it works very well.
- Acetaminophen can safely be taken for pain relief even if NSAIDs are being used.
- ASA, ibuprofen and prescription NSAIDs may increase your risk of stomach upset and bleeding in the gut. Let your doctor know if you experience stomach pain or indigestion.

For medications prescribed by your doctor, it is important to know:

Name(s) (generic and brand): _____

How much to take: _____

When to take it: _____

How quickly will it work: _____

For how long should it be taken: _____

Side effects to look out for: _____

Joint Injection

- Cortisone may be injected into the joint if there is any sign of inflammation.
- Viscosupplementation may be an option for the treatment of your knee. A gel-like substance is injected into the knee that helps the joint lubricate the cartilage and absorb shock.

Surgery

- If the joint becomes severely damaged or the pain is unbearable, surgery may be an option.

For more information...

This fact sheet is just a brief look at osteoarthritis. For more information or if you have any questions, ask your doctor or call The Arthritis Society at 1-800-321-1433. You can also visit The Arthritis Society's website at www.arthritis.ca

Questions to ask your doctor at your next visit

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