

# House Calls

## Oh My Aching 'Arthrons'

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

The word arthritis is derived from Greek words meaning joint inflammation. However for people who suffer from arthritis, the word simply translates into varying degrees of pain. The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis, also referred to as degenerative joint disease. It results in the deterioration of the bones and cartilage that make up the joints. This is typically caused by normal wear and tear over time, as well as trauma to the joints. All types of arthritis affect the musculoskeletal system, however the joints involved and the level of damage vary.

Primary osteoarthritis is commonly linked to older age when the cartilage naturally breaks down due to wear and tear of the joint. Trauma to a joint, such as an accident is another primary cause. Physical conditions, most commonly obesity, cause secondary osteoarthritis. Risk factors for osteoarthritis include: overuse or injury to a joint such as an accident or sports; direct trauma to a joint; dislocating a joint; genetic defects that affect the cartilage; diabetes, gout, and other hormone disorders and poor posture.

The most common symptom of osteoarthritis is pain with weight bearing. This is caused by wearing down of the cartilage which acts as a cushion inside the joints. It is known as a progressive disease, getting worse with time. Once you decrease your movement because of the pain, the surrounding muscles start to atrophy, or shrink, and ligaments become more lax. Other symptoms include loss of joint movement, stiffness and swelling of the joints, and snapping or popping of the joints. Osteoarthritis most frequently occurs in the knees, hips, ankles, hands, and other weight bearing joints. This is because there is more physical stress placed on these joints which cause more wear than on other non-weight bearing joints.

If you are experiencing symptoms of arthritis, it is important you see your medical provider for confirmation of your diagnosis, and treatment options. Your provider will take a thorough history and physical examination of your joints, and may require an x-ray for confirmation. The most common treatment for osteoarthritis is exercise, analgesics, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS). NSAIDS have the benefit of relieving both pain and inflammation; however they have potentially dangerous side effects when used chronically, and should be used as directed by a medical provider. Severe osteoarthritis in weight bearing joints often requires joint replacement surgery.

While osteoarthritis is not completely preventable, there are three things you can do to decrease your chances of developing it, or decreasing the severity of the disease when you do get it. Since excess weight adds unnecessary strain to the joints, maintaining an appropriate weight may be the single most important thing you can do to prevent osteoarthritis. Lose excess unhealthy weight to prevent or lessen joint damage and decrease the stress on weight bearing joints. Protecting your joints from serious injury or repeated minor injuries will decrease your risk of damaging cartilage. Repeated minor injuries include frequent or constant squatting, kneeling, or other postures that place stress on the knee joint. Wearing protective gear in sports, and not playing through an injury may also help prevent osteoarthritis. Exercise can help reduce joint pain and stiffness. Light to moderate intensity physical activity may prevent a decline in and may even restore health and function of your joints.

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