



Arthritis

It takes just a bit of cold weather and some rain, and around the world people start feeling stiff with aching bones and poor spirits. Chances are, the culprit is arthritis. But what is arthritis, and what can be done to ease the pain?

Osteoarthritis

This is the most common form of arthritis. It affects 65 to 80% of people at some stage in their lives.

Osteoarthritis is the so-called "wear and tear" destruction of joints. It usually affects larger, weight-bearing joints such as hips, spines, and knees. In the hands, it usually affects the knuckles more than the fingers. It can also become worse following a joint injury, such as a fall, or a car accident.

What happens?

The joints wear away. This begins with the softer connecting parts such as cartilages or spinal discs, and continues until the bones become crumbly and roughened. They often become larger and thicker shaped.

This results in pain in the joints that is worse after heavy or prolonged use. For example, towards the end of a busy day, or after a long walk or car journey.

Sometimes nearby nerves can become pinched. Sometimes the joint becomes so eroded that it needs to be replaced with an artificial joint.

Inflammatory arthritis

This arthritis involves a degree of swelling of the joint with stiffness and pain. Because the body can only make anti-inflammatory hormones while it is awake, the symptoms of inflammatory joints are



often worse after a night's sleep. People with inflammatory arthritis often sleep poorly, waking tired and stiff.

Sometimes the trigger for inflammation may be an infection, such as the mosquito-borne Ross River Fever virus. This is carried in the blood and circulated through the joints over a period of months to years.

Rheumatoid arthritis

This form of arthritis is one of the few that can also affect children. It affects about one in 100 people.

The delicate tissues within the joints become raw and swollen. Fluid builds up and causes the joints to become hot and red, and extremely stiff and painful.

The cause is not known, but it is more common in women, and within some family groups. This type of arthritis can lead to the eventual destruction of joints and quite devastating disability.

How can I reduce the effects of arthritis?

Regular exercise can reduce the severity and frequency of symptoms. Aim towards aerobic fitness rather than just stretches. Try to get regular amounts of about 30 minutes exercise, rather than a weekend workout that may have the opposite effect.

Swimming is excellent as the water helps take some strain off the joints while still allowing their mobility to be maintained.

Cycling should be by 'spinning', moving the legs quickly with very little pressure by using a low gear.

Walking is excellent, but you should wear good quality footwear. This needn't be expensive, but involves a shoe with a thick, but flexible, sole to reduce the impact transmitted to the joints.

Physiotherapy/chiropractic

Manipulation of severely affected joints can result in damage, but in the early stages of arthritis, physiotherapy can be very effective at restoring function to stiff joints. Talk to your doctor about this.

Pain relief

Relief can be obtained initially by using ice packs to reduce the inflammatory pain. This is followed a few days later by heat packs to ease muscular spasms. Many people find that massage, gentle stretching or rolling can also help.

What about medication?

It is best to discuss your arthritis medication with your doctor as it varies with the type of arthritis. It is important to realise the tablets that suit a friend

may not be the best ones for you. Taking them might delay a correct diagnosis by masking your symptoms, and there can be further damage to your joints.

However, most people benefit from low dose pain killers such as paracetamol or aspirin, and the variety of skin rubs available from the chemist. These may help ease the pain and improve circulation.

What about my diet?

Doctors will usually advise overweight people to lose some weight, especially for arthritis of the knees, and arthritis with trapped-nerve pains.

There is not yet convincing evidence of a link between nutrition and arthritis. However, some people find relief by avoiding acid foods (like tomatoes and citrus), red meat, dairy products, and preservatives and colourings in food.

Reducing your intake of alcohol, especially red wine and beer, and purine-rich foods such as prawns, is helpful for gout.

Fish oils in the diet seem to protect against rheumatic disease, as does a reduction of saturated fats in the diet.

It is also important to note that any chronic illness can alter the body's nutritional state. Many people with arthritis become low in vitamins E and B, folic acid, zinc, magnesium, iron, and calcium. This can make their symptoms worse as well as cause other ailments, and supplements may be needed.

