

What is Arthritis?

Arthritis refers to more than 100 different diseases that cause pain, swelling, and limited movement in joints and connective tissues throughout the body. It is usually chronic, meaning that it lasts a lifetime. Specific causes for most forms of arthritis are not yet known. How the disease progresses also varies depending on the form of arthritis. The two most prevalent forms of arthritis are:

Osteoarthritis - A degenerative joint disease in which the cartilage that covers and protects the end of the bones in the joint deteriorates, causing pain and loss of movement as bone begins to rub against the bone.

Rheumatoid arthritis - A systemic disease that affects the entire body. It is characterized by the inflammation of membrane lining the joints, which causes pain, warmth, redness, and swelling. The chronic inflammation causes deterioration of the joint, pain, and limited movement.

Treatment Options

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) is a medical specialty dedicated to maximizing quality of life. PM&R physicians have advanced training and skill in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of functional disabilities of all types. The treatment options used by PM&R physicians to help manage arthritis may include a combination of the following:

Exercise

Proper exercises performed on a daily basis are an important part of arthritis treatment. They help build and preserve muscle strength, keep joints flexible, and help protect joints from further damage. There are two broad categories of exercise:

Therapeutic - A PM&R physician can prescribe therapeutic exercises based on individual needs that are designed that reach a certain goal.

Recreational - Includes any form of movement, amusement, or relaxation that refreshes the body and mind. These exercises add to a therapeutic program, but do not replace it.

Physical/Occupational Therapy

Physical and occupational therapies are designed to help people with arthritis make their lives easier. Physical therapy treatment includes muscle strengthening and range-of-motion exercises. It also teaches ways to control pain without medication. Occupational therapy focuses on obtaining maximum independence and minimizing reoccurrence through education and treatment techniques.

Medicines

Many different medications are used to treat arthritis, including pain relievers, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and aspirin.

Rest

Rest helps relieve the effects of too much activity. However, too much rest may lead to stiffness and poorly moving joints. The right balance has to be found for each person.

(continued on back)

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Heat and Cold

Application of heat or cold can help reduce arthritis pain temporarily. Heat can be applied in many forms including warm baths or showers, electric pads, infrared lamps, and whirlpools. Cold therapy includes ice packs, frozen bags of peas or corn, or a wet towel that has been placed in the freezer.

Diet

Diet may influence certain forms of arthritis. A balanced diet and careful weight control can help people with arthritis manage the pain, inflammation, and loss of movement caused by arthritis.

Prevention

Taking the following steps may help prevent or reduce the effects of arthritis:

Know the Warning Signs

If you have any of these signs in or around a joint for more than two weeks, see your doctor: Pain, Stiffness, Swelling (sometimes), Difficulty moving a joint.

Seek Early Diagnosis and Treatment

Early diagnosis and treatment are important to help slow or prevent damage to joints that can occur during the first few years after arthritis is diagnosed. The longer the disease persists, the more the joints are damaged; therefore it is vital to receive treatment as soon as a diagnosis is made.

Maintain Appropriate Weight

Maintaining an appropriate weight can reduce the risks for developing osteoarthritis in the knees, and possibly in the hips and hands.

Protect Joints

Joint injuries caused by accidents, injuries, or overuse can increase the risk for osteoarthritis. Keeping the muscles around joints strong may reduce the risk of wear on that joint.

Exercise

Regular physical activity helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.

Cited from: aaPM&R – American Academy of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation

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