Osteoarthritis: The Most Common Form of Arthritis

You hear a lot about arthritis on television, in newspaper flyers, and in health care magazine ads. But did you know that there are more than 100 different forms of arthritis? The most common form is called osteoarthritis (OA). Research shows that there are more than 10 million Americans living with osteoarthritis of the knee alone. Most are over the age of 45, and women are generally more affected than men. Many other Americans suffer from osteoarthritis of other joints, including the small joints in the hand and the spine, and the large joints in the hip. Symptoms of OA

One of the primary symptoms of osteoarthritis is joint pain, usually in the evening. That's because joints typically hurt more after prolonged use. Joints can become red, warm, stiff, or swollen. You may have difficulty walking or even dressing. Remember, however, that in the early stages of osteoarthritis, there may be no physical symptoms at all. In fact, according to the Arthritis Foundation (www.arthritis.org), of the people over age 60 who show signs of osteoarthritis on an x-ray, two-thirds of them experience no physical symptoms. That's because osteoarthritis is a progressive disease. The breakdown of cartilage that is seen with this condition occurs in several phases over a long period of time, often many years. Treatment of OA

While there is currently no cure for osteoarthritis, there are things that can be done to help people who suffer from the disease live a more normal, pain-free life. Proper exercise and weight control are two of the main things that individuals can do on their own. In more severe forms of the disease, doctor prescribed medications, and in certain circumstances joint replacement may also be recommended.

Exercise. One of the first steps in the treatment of OA is establishing a regular exercise program. Proper aerobic exercise helps keep joints flexible and strengthens the muscles around the joints. Keep in mind, though, that the type of exercise is important. Swimming is an excellent exercise for all types of arthritis. It places very little demand on the joints. Stretching exercises can also be helpful in treating the symptoms of OA.

Weight Control. Maintaining a healthy weight for your height is another important preventative measure for osteoarthritis. Research shows that people who are overweight are at higher risk for OA than others, mainly because of the extra wear and tear obesity puts on weight-bearing joints. This is especially important for the large weight-bearing joints such as the hip and the knee. Studies show that excess body weight can increase a person's risk of developing knee OA, many years before the onset of symptoms.

Medications. For more severe cases of OA, your doctor may prescribe pain medication, or analgesics, to ease the symptoms of the disease. Such drugs do not relieve the inflammation or swelling. If the joint is inflamed or if you experience swelling of the joints, your doctor may recommend a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID). Ibuprofen is an example of one type of over-the-counter NSAID.

Joint Replacement. In advanced stages of osteoarthritis, when other forms of treatment don't help, surgery may be recommended for severely damaged joints. Hip replacement is one of the most common joint replacement surgeries and can produce excellent results.

Conclusion. The symptoms of OA are treatable, especially in the early stages of the disease. If you have pain or stiffness in a joint, contact your health care professional to be evaluated for OA and other conditions. Your health care professional can help choose a treatment that's right for you. How Do You Know? Steady or intermittent pain in a joint Stiffness in a joint after getting out of bed or sitting for a long time Swelling or tenderness in one or more joints A crunching feeling or the sound of bone rubbing on bone Hot, red, or tender? Probably not osteoarthritis. Check with your doctor about other causes, such as rheumatoid arthritis. Pain? Not always. In fact, only a third of people whose x-rays show evidence of osteoarthritis report pain or other symptoms. Source: The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases www.niams.nih.gov/index.htm.

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