

Self-Managing Arthritis Pain



Arthritis comes from the Greek “arthros” meaning joint and “itis” meaning inflammation. There are different types of arthritis and they each need a different approach to treatment. The most common type is osteoarthritis. Nearly half of people over 65 have this variety, related to wear and tear of the cartilage which normally cushions the joint surface. Joints that are commonly affected are the hands, neck, lower back and weight-bearing joints such as the hips and the knees. Heredity and overweight are major contributing factors in the development of this type of arthritis.

FORMS OF ARTHRITIS

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that occurs when your body’s immune system attacks the joint lining as if to defend it from injury. This leads to inflammation, tenderness and ultimately destruction of the joint capsule with resulting deformity called “Heberden’s nodes.” Rheumatoid arthritis can attack any joint at any age, and women are more affected than men. This condition also affects the other organs of the body such as the heart, muscles, blood vessels, nervous system and eyes.

Gout is another very painful form of arthritis that occurs with a build up of excess uric acid in the joint surfaces. A gout attack often follows after eating certain foods like shellfish, liver, dried beans, peas or anchovies. The big toe, ankle, knee, wrist or hands are commonly affected joints.

Other forms of arthritis include psoriatic and/or reactive types of arthritis, and arthritis in the TMJ (jaw joint).

COMMON TREATMENT

Each type of arthritis is handled a little differently, but there are some common treatment choices. Rest, ice, heat, splints, using modified appliances such as bottle openers or handle bar assists, and medications such as NSAIDs—non steroidal anti inflammatory medications (e.g., ibuprofen, naprasyn (Aleve), acetaminophen (Tylenol)) are used to control the pain and inflammation of joints.

Corticosteroids are also used but they do have significant side effects with prolonged use, such as osteoporosis. Non-chemical methods of pain control include the use of a TENS unit which works on the GATE control theory of pain. Self-massage and gentle yoga or Tai’chi

movements are also helpful. DMards (disease modifying anti rheumatic drugs) are used for rheumatoid arthritis such as methotrexate and drugs like Prednisone for an acute attack of gout.

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Whenver you have a warm and swollen joint, the RICE protocol—rest, ice, compression and elevation—is a good rule to follow. The right kind of exercise is very important since the joint gets its nutrition and lubrication with movement. A good idea is to take every joint through its normal range of motion every morning.

A good exercise program should also include an aerobic component such as walking or using a stationary bike. Light resistance exercise is also needed to build muscle strength to relieve pressure on the joints. This can be accomplished with the use of light dumbbells and/or resistance bands.

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This handout was written by Asha Bojaj, PT, DPT.

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