

Osteoarthritis

DESCRIPTION

Osteoarthritis, also called degenerative arthritis, is the most common type of arthritis and affects 20 million people in the United States. It is a joint disease that breaks down cartilage, the smooth, cushioning material inside joints. In osteoarthritis, the cartilage wears away and allows the bones to rub together. The bone surface of the joint also becomes rough and irregular. As a result, movement of the joint becomes painful and difficult.

Osteoarthritis occurs most often in weight-bearing joints, such as the neck, lower back, knees and hips. It also affects the fingers. It is three times more common in women than men and begins to appear in middle age. By age 60, most people have some osteoarthritis, although it may be too mild to cause symptoms.

CAUSES

- Excessive wear on joints
- Obesity
- Bad posture
- Old injuries
- Overuse of joints
- Heredity

PREVENTION

No one knows how to prevent the disease; however, there are ways to prevent the symptoms.

- Keep your joints in good working order. Stay fit with daily moderate exercise
- Protect your joints by doing warm-up exercises before activity
- Use a knee pad to protect your knees when you are kneeling
- Take the medication that is prescribed by your physician.

SYMPTOMS

See your physician if you have any of these symptoms in or around a joint for more than two weeks:

- Mild to severe pain in a joint (especially after overuse or long periods of inactivity)
- Swelling, stiffness or limited movement of the joint (especially in the morning)
- Weakness in muscles around the sore joint from lack of use
- Deformity of the joint

TREATMENT

The goal of treatment is to keep the joint working by reducing strain on the joint and relieving pain, stiffness and swelling.

- Over-the-counter medications may be helpful if taken as directed on the label:
 - Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) is effective at relieving joint pain and does not irritate the stomach
 - Ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®, Nuprin®) or naproxen (Aleve®) are effective at relieving joint pain and inflammation but may cause stomach upset, irritation or ulcers

- Capsaicin creams, rubs or sprays may help relieve pain
- Prescription medications may be needed for severe pain and inflammation
- Both heating pads and ice packs can help reduce pain and stiffness in a joint
- If you are overweight, your healthcare provider may recommend that you lose weight
- Physical and/or occupational therapy may be needed to regain normal movement
- Regular, gentle aerobic exercise is important for controlling osteoarthritis
 - Walking and water aerobics are safe, gentle ways to exercise (People with severe osteoarthritis should seek medical advice before initiating a walking program)
 - Exercise should not put a strain on your joints or cause heavy impact on your joints
 - Proper shoes are important
- Severely damaged hips and knees may need to be surgically replaced.

ALTERNATIVE THERAPY

- Glucosamine and chondroitin may be beneficial; however, these products have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for safety and efficacy
- Copper bracelets, herbal teas and magnet therapy are probably not harmful; however, no scientific research to date shows that these particular alternative therapies appeared to be helpful.