

Ease the Aches of Arthritis

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As a doctor specializing in sports medicine, I see many highly active people suffering from arthritis. They range from young athletes who push their bodies too hard to weekend warriors who haven't realized that their middle-aged frames aren't intended to shoot hoops or play killer tennis for hours at a time. Many of my patients also are ordinary folks who suffer from osteoarthritis, the most common form of the disease.

Arthritis affects 46 million Americans and, with baby boomers aging, the number is expected to reach 67 million by the year 2030. It remains the nation's leading cause of disability in those over age 15. Until recently, we viewed arthritis mainly as the result of wear and tear on the joints that caused a gradual loss of cartilage, the smooth layer of connective tissue that enables our bones to absorb the shock of joint motion and to move smoothly and without pain.

But what is it that makes us lose cartilage? Accidents and injuries are one reason, but they account for a relatively small proportion of all cases of osteoarthritis. One of the main culprits, in fact, is inflammation. Its connection to osteoarthritis—and to pain in general—has shown up only recently in scientific studies.

Ironically, inflammation is a self-protective process that occurs when we get hurt. It has many positive effects, such as increasing blood supply to an injured area. But we're now learning that this protective reaction can backfire on us. Sometimes inflammation continues long after it is needed, leading to greater pain and further loss of cartilage in joints. (Researchers also have been studying the role of inflammation in heart disease, cancers, diabetes, and other conditions.)

Injuries aren't the only triggers of inflammation. Poor diet and lack of exercise also play a part. But one of the keys to reducing arthritis pain is reducing or stopping unwanted inflammation. While there is no cure for arthritis at present, you can do a few things to slow its progression and relieve the pain. The following noninvasive treatments can offer relief to most arthritis sufferers.

Watch your diet. Eat foods that reduce inflammation, and avoid those that cause it. Red meat and high-fructose corn syrup both are loaded with omega-6 fatty acids, which tend to promote inflammation. Processed sugars and saturated fats also are prime culprits in America's epidemic of overweight and obesity, which are factors in arthritis. Extra weight places further stress on the spine, hip, and knee joints and exacerbates any inflammation there.

Instead, to reduce inflammation, consume more foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as deep-sea fish, flaxseed, brightly colored fruits, dark-green leafy vegetables, and olive oil. (Keep in mind that nutritionists now recommend eating these same foods to improve overall health.) Our prehistoric ancestors, to whom arthritis was virtually unknown, ate a diet in which omega-6 was consumed in roughly equal proportion to omega-3. Today, that proportion is out of whack.

Supplement if necessary. Recent scientific data indicate that the use of ginger, glucosamine, and chondroitin sulfate may be helpful for moderate to severe knee arthritis. In fact, ginger has been used in India for centuries to alleviate arthritis pain. For specific recommendations, check with your doctor.

Use your body. Some people with arthritis are afraid that exercise can hurt them. But it's just the opposite.

Simple exercises are needed for proper functioning of an arthritic joint. Begin with stretches, particularly of the affected joint. (For example, try hand stretches if fingers are painful.) If your arthritic joint can handle it, walking just 20 to 30 minutes a day can prevent further deterioration. Swimming and bicycling often are helpful as well.

Breathe properly. Proper breathing in a slow, controlled rhythm is the fastest pain reliever I know of, because it shifts the mind's attention away from the pain. Any mild form of stretching with controlled breathing, such as yoga or tai chi, also can relieve arthritis pain. Some of my patients have seen real improvement just a few months after starting Pilates classes.

Try massage and acupuncture. Because mainstream medicine has not provided enough arthritis treatments short of drugs and surgery, many arthritis sufferers have turned to alternative treatments such as massage and acupuncture. Specifically, massage therapy has been shown to be beneficial for arthritis of the spine and hip, and acupuncture has yielded promising results for knee arthritis in clinical trials.

Other treatments. For those whose pain continues even after adopting these lifestyle changes, injections of hyaluronate, a synthetic joint fluid, may provide relief. But we are on the threshold of new scientific developments that combined with early detection and intervention, promise to change arthritis treatment as we know it. Researchers are working on injectable gels that have properties resembling those of healthy joint fluid. They can be targeted to a specific joint to help reduce pain in the long term while protecting the cartilage. Preliminary data show that using your own blood plasma, which is rich in growth factors, may stimulate an arthritic joint to produce high-quality joint fluid. And there is promising research using stem cells and gene therapies that may enable us to regrow cartilage.

These new technologies could begin to hit the market in just a few years. In the meantime, eating a sound anti-inflammatory diet, taking safe supplements, and following a sensible exercise regimen while keeping your body weight in check will help you avoid many of the worst effects of arthritis.

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