

Osteo-arthritis

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is by far the most common form of arthritis. In last week's article I spoke about rheumatoid arthritis which is caused by inflammation, however osteoarthritis is caused by ageing and long-term wear-and-tear in the joints. After years of use, the cartilage that cushions the joints can break down, until bone rubs against bone. The bone beneath compensates by thickening and growing outwards causing "outgrowths" or spurs which also cause pain. Osteoarthritis mainly affects the finger joints, knees and hips.

Osteoarthritis is rarely as crippling as rheumatoid arthritis, but it can have a big impact on a person's life. The condition is the number one reason for joint-replacement surgery. It can take decades for enough cartilage to wear down to cause osteoarthritis. It occurs mostly in men after the age of 50 and in women after the age of 40. Women develop osteoarthritis mostly after menopause. After menopause, women are twice as likely as men of the same age to develop the condition. Being overweight and a family history of arthritis makes you more prone to the condition.

Symptoms

The main symptoms of osteoarthritis are pain and stiffness of the joints. The joints may also become swollen although this is less common than in rheumatoid arthritis. The pain can be worse after exercise. The joints may not be able to move as easily as before. Joints may make creaking sounds called crepitations. As osteoarthritis progresses, the joints may become misshapen and look knobby, and they may become unstable.

Some people find that the symptoms are affected by changes in the weather or the amount of activity they do. Sometimes pain and stiffness can be more severe in the early stages, especially in women who develop osteoarthritis around the time of the menopause. It then tends to settle down over the next few years.

Causes

The exact causes are unknown however certain factors make it more likely:

- Being over the age of forty
- Women are more at risk than men.
- If you are overweight or obese as there is greater strain on the joints.
- Some types run in families.
- Playing a lot of high impact sport (eg) Gaelic football and rugby
- If you have an injury or an operation on a joint, you are more likely to have problems later on.

Diagnosis

Unlike other forms of arthritis, there is no single test that can check for osteoarthritis, so your GP will ask about your symptoms and examine you. He or she will look for bony outgrowths, swelling, creaking, instability and reduced movement of the joint.

An X-ray image can show up any narrowing within your joint or outgrowths of bone. However, these can only give limited information and in the early stages of osteoarthritis they may look normal.

Treatment

Self-help

- trying to lose any excess weight
- wearing shock-absorbent shoes
- using a walking stick
- wearing a knee brace

Taking regular exercise is important as it keeps weight down and strengthens muscles which support the joints. Swimming is the best exercise for osteoarthritis as it strengthens muscles without putting strain on the joints.

Medicines

There is no cure for osteoarthritis however certain medication will relieve symptoms. Over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol can help. If the pain is more severe, your doctor may prescribe anti-inflammatory medicines known as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) to reduce the inflammation. These are helpful in reducing pain, swelling and stiffness. Nurofen[®] is an anti-inflammatory available over the counter in pharmacies, however it is important to check with your pharmacist if it is suitable for you as it should be avoided in people with asthma and heart problems and can cause stomach ulcers if over used.

Non-surgical treatments

NSAIDs are also available as creams and gels - you can rub these directly onto affected areas. These are less likely to have side-effects than NSAIDs taken orally, but may be less effective as less of the drug is absorbed. An example of an NSAID gel available over the counter in pharmacies is Diclac[®] Gel. In Whelehans, we find that many people find some relief from The Rub[®]. The Rub is a herbal remedy available in Whelehans which has been passed down by generations. Heat therapies such as Cura[®] heat patch can also give some relief. If you have very painful osteoarthritis, your doctor may suggest that you have steroid injections. These are given directly into the affected area.

Supplements

Glucosamine and chondroitin supplements may provide you with some pain relief. These chemicals are found naturally in cartilage and it's thought that taking supplements may improve the condition of damaged cartilage. They may also slow down thinning of the cartilage. Unlike rheumatoid arthritis, fish oils and omega 3 supplements are not very effective at relieving the symptoms of osteoarthritis. This is because osteoarthritis is not caused by inflammation and omega 3 supplements work by reducing inflammation.

Surgery

The surgical options available have advanced recently. Some options such as realignment and hip resurfacing are available even if you have only mild osteoarthritis.

If you have a particularly painful joint you may need an operation to replace it. This is most commonly done for the hip and knee joints and both of these have high rates of success in improving mobility and reducing pain.

Disclaimer: Consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended especially if you have a medical condition

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