

Health Notes by Evelyn Ames Osteoarthritis!

OA is a chronic condition characterized by the breakdown of the joint's cartilage. This causes bones to rub against each other causing pain, stiffness and loss of joint movement. Cartilage, which serves as a cushion, loses elasticity and the underlying bone thickens and cysts may occur under the cartilage. Osteoarthritis occurs more frequently as we age. Before age 45, it occurs more frequently in males but after age 55, it occurs more frequently in females. OA commonly affects hands, feet, spine, and large weight-bearing joints (e.g., knees and hips). Most cases have no known cause (called primary OA). When the cause is known, it is referred to as secondary OA.

What causes osteoarthritis? "While no one factor appears to cause cartilage damage, researchers point to excess weight that adds to joint stress; sports- and work-related activities and injuries; and a family history of joint and cartilage weakness as contributing to OA. Age, in and of itself, is not a definitive cause of OA, but can exacerbate the deterioration process" (Amer College of Rheumatology). Primary OA is mostly related to aging. Repetitive use of joints over the years irritates and inflames cartilage. Eventually, cartilage begins to degenerate by flaking or forming tiny crevasses. Inflammation of cartilage stimulates new bone outgrowths. Genetics (heredity) plays a role, especially in relation to Heberden's nodes and Bouchard's nodes (OA of hands). Secondary OA is caused by other conditions or diseases such as obesity, repeated trauma or surgery to joints, congenital abnormalities, gout, diabetes, or other hormone disorders.

According to several resources (see web sites listed at end) used for this article, there is no cure for OA, but a person can do several things to manage the impact on lifestyle. Appropriate support and positioning of neck and back while sleeping and sitting (check how you sit at a computer) and avoiding repetitive motions of a joint are helpful hints. Regular exercise that increases strength, especially of the quadriceps (thigh muscles), is highly recommended. Strong quads mean a stronger knee joint. Among adults with knee osteoarthritis (OA), engaging in moderate physical activity just three times a week can reduce the risk of arthritis-related disability by 47 percent.

Treating Osteoarthritis. The goal is to reduce pain and improve function of affected joints. Can drugs, surgery, physical therapy, supplements, or alternative treatments help? A simple answer is yes, maybe, and no! Various treatments, especially drugs, exercise, arthroscopic surgery, and supplements are discussed within several web sites listed at the end. Because of space limitation, readers are referred to these sites. Readers may be interested in reviewing a report by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). The review analyzed a total of 76 clinical studies and found no benefit from the nutritional supplements glucosamine and chondroitin, injected hyaluronic acid preparations and arthroscopic surgery to clean the knee joint.

Living with osteoarthritis. Actions one can take to prevent the progression of OA: maintain an appropriate and healthy weight; protect joints from serious injury or repeated minor injuries; engage in light to moderate exercise to help reduce joint pain and stiffness (heat and cold therapy or taking pain relievers may make it easier to stay active); choose appropriate footwear; maintain good posture; use assistive devices; keep a positive attitude.

What does the future hold for osteoarthritis? Readers may wish to check the following web sites:

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases <http://www.niams.nih.gov/>
http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Osteoarthritis/default.asp
<http://www.arthritis.org/exercise-reduces-disability.php> <http://www.medicinenet.com/osteoarthritis/page6.htm>
http://www.rheumatology.org/public/factsheets/oa_new.asp?aud=pat (American College of Rheumatology)
<http://www.peacehealth.org/kbase/topic/major/hw125723/descrip.htm>
Arthritis Foundation http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease_id=32&df=definition
Mayo Clinic <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/osteoarthritis/DS00019>