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**HEALTH****Arthritis**

**What is it?** Arthritis is an inflammation of the joints. It's the greatest cause of disability in the UK and is the reason for one in five visits to the doctor. At the moment there's no cure, but this doesn't mean that people have to suffer.

**Osteoarthritis:** There are about 200 different kinds of arthritis. The most common type is osteoarthritis (or degenerative arthritis), where the cartilage that protects the bones gets worn away. This makes joints stiff, painful and creaky. It is often caused by normal wear and tear of the joints, so it usually occurs as people get older and the protective joint cartilage is worn away. However, younger people can also get it, often because of an accident or sports injury where a joint has been placed under unnatural strain.

**Rheumatoid arthritis:** Rheumatoid arthritis, or inflammatory arthritis, is a more severe but less common condition. The body's immune system attacks and destroys the joint lining, making the joints painful, unstable and deformed. This type of arthritis tends to affect younger people and is more common in women than in men. It affects about one in 100 people.

**How does arthritis affect people?** Many people mistakenly assume they have to put up with arthritis, especially those with osteoarthritis who believe it's part of the legacy of old age. Some people become depressed because they can't do things they take for granted, such as getting dressed or going for a walk, and become isolated.

There isn't a cure for arthritis, but it can be kept under control enabling people to get on with living fulfilling lives. To reduce the risk of developing osteoarthritis, it's important to avoid being overweight, which puts joints under pressure.

It's also worth including plenty of calcium, vitamin C and vitamin D in your diet to maintain healthy bones and joints.

**How is it treated?** In conventional treatment, painkillers, such as paracetamol, are essential. Anti-inflammatory medications, such as ibuprofen, can help with episodes of more severe pain. It's important to consult a doctor before taking any medicine for a long time.

These medications known as the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, can damage the lining of the stomach causing ulcers, which sometimes bleed. They should always be taken with or after food. In recent years a new type of NSAID treatment, called Cox-2 inhibitors, has been launched. These were initially claimed to be less harmful to the stomach and many patients have found that they provided good pain relief for their arthritis. However, recent research has led to major concerns about other side effects such as damage to the heart, which seem to be more common with Cox-2 inhibitors. Physiotherapy relieves pain and strengthens muscles around the damaged joint, helping the joint to work better. Regular exercise is beneficial for the same reasons and, once pain is under control, easy to do. It provides people with a physical and psychological boost, and helps overweight people to shed a few pounds, which reduces the strain on joints.

If the pain can't be controlled by medication, the joint may need replacing. Hip and knee replacements are common and usually involve a short hospital visit.

Disease-modifying drugs that slow disease progression are available for people with rheumatoid arthritis.

**Conventional treatments:** painkillers, such as paracetamol, anti-inflammatory medications, such as ibuprofen, physiotherapy, exercise and maintain ideal weight

**Complementary treatments**

Some people find that eating more vegetables, bananas and cherries eases symptoms. One of the oldest natural anti-inflammatory treatments is ginger, which can be incorporated into the diet or taken as a concentrated capsule available from pharmacists or health food shops. Glucosamine sulphate is a major part of the protein that forms cartilage in joints. It's this cartilage that is worn away in osteoarthritis. Another substance that acts as a part of the joint's shock absorber is chondroitin sulphate. Glucosamine and chondroitin taken together or separately can help to reduce the pain of osteoarthritis and may help to repair damaged joints.

Cod liver oil treatment may help to ease the pain and inflammation of arthritis. The fatty acids in cod liver oil and other fish oils - such as mackerel, herrings, sardines and salmon - reduce the activity of enzymes that are responsible for damaging the protective cartilage. These fatty acids also switch off chemical processes that cause pain and inflammation. Cod liver oil is available in capsules for those who don't like the taste.

*(This article was last medically reviewed by Dr Rob Hicks)*