

ARTHRITIS

What Is Arthritis?

The word arthritis literally means joint inflammation, but it is often used to refer to a group of more than 100 rheumatic diseases that can cause pain, stiffness, and swelling in the joints. These diseases may affect not only the joints but also other parts of the body, including important supporting structures such as muscles, bones, tendons, and ligaments, as well as some internal organs. This booklet focuses on pain caused by two of the most common forms of arthritis-- osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

What Is Pain?

Pain is the body's warning system, alerting you that something is wrong. The International Association for the Study of Pain defines it as an unpleasant experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage to a person's body. Specialized nervous system cells (neurons) that transmit pain signals are found throughout the skin and other body tissues. These cells respond to things such as injury or tissue damage. For example, when a harmful agent such as a sharp knife comes in contact with your skin, chemical signals travel from neurons in the skin through nerves in the spinal cord to your brain, where they are interpreted as pain.

Most forms of arthritis are associated with pain that can be divided into two general categories: acute and chronic. Acute pain is temporary. It can last a few seconds or longer but wanes as healing occurs. Some examples of things that cause acute pain include burns, cuts, and fractures. Chronic pain, such as that seen in people with osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, ranges from mild to severe and can last weeks, months, and years to a lifetime.

How Many Americans Have Arthritis Pain?

Chronic pain is a major health problem in the United States and is one of the most weakening effects of arthritis. More than 40 million Americans are affected by some form of arthritis, and many have chronic pain that limits daily activity. Osteoarthritis is by far the most common form of arthritis, affecting over 20 million Americans, while rheumatoid arthritis, which affects about 2.1 million Americans, is the most disabling form of the disease.

How Do Doctors Measure Arthritis Pain?

Pain is a private, unique experience that cannot be seen. The most common way to measure pain is for the doctor to ask you, the patient, about your difficulties. For example, the doctor may ask you to describe the level of pain you feel on a scale of 1 to 10. You may use words like aching, burning, stinging, or throbbing. These words will give the doctor a clearer picture of the pain you are experiencing.

Since doctors rely on your description of pain to help guide treatment, you may want to keep a pain diary to record your pain sensations. You can begin a week or two before your visit to the doctor. On a daily basis, you can describe the

situations that cause or alter the intensity of your pain, the sensations and severity of your pain, and your reactions to the pain. For example: "On Monday night, sharp pains in my knees produced by housework interfered with my sleep; on Tuesday morning, because of the pain, I had a hard time getting out of bed. However, I coped with the pain by taking my medication and applying ice to my knees." The diary will give the doctor some insight into your pain and may play a critical role in the management of your disease.

What Will Happen When You First Visit a Doctor for Your Arthritis Pain?

The doctor will usually do the following:

- Take your medical history and ask questions such as, how long have you been experiencing pain? How intense is the pain? How often does it occur? What causes it to get worse? What causes it to get better?
- Review the medications you are using
- Conduct a physical examination to determine causes of pain and how this pain is affecting your ability to function
- Take blood and/or urine samples and request necessary laboratory work
- Ask you to get x rays taken or undergo other imaging procedures such as a CAT scan (computerized axial tomography) or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) to see how much joint damage has been done.

Once the doctor has done these things and reviewed the results of any tests or procedures, he or she will discuss the findings with you and design a comprehensive management approach for the pain caused by your osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis.

How Is Arthritis Pain Treated?

There is no single treatment that applies to everyone with arthritis, but rather the doctor will develop a management plan designed to minimize your specific pain and improve the function of your joints. A number of treatments can provide short-term pain relief.

Short-Term Relief

- **Medications**--Because people with osteoarthritis have very little inflammation, pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol*) may be effective. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis generally have pain caused by inflammation and often benefit from aspirin or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or Motrin.
- **Heat and cold**--The decision to use either heat or cold for arthritis pain depends on the type of arthritis and should be discussed with your doctor or physical therapist. Moist heat, such as a warm bath or shower, or dry heat, such as a heating pad, placed on the painful area of the joint for about 15 minutes may relieve the pain. An ice pack (or a bag of frozen vegetables) wrapped in a towel and placed on the sore area for about 15

minutes may help to reduce swelling and stop the pain. If you have poor circulation, do not use cold packs.

- **Joint protection**--Using a splint or a brace to allow joints to rest and protect them from injury can be helpful. Your physician or physical therapist can make recommendations.
- **Massage**--In this pain-relief approach, a massage therapist will lightly stroke and/or knead the painful muscle. This may increase blood flow and bring warmth to a stressed area. However, arthritis-stressed joints are very sensitive, so the therapist must be familiar with the problems of the disease.

Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis are chronic diseases that may last a lifetime. Learning how to manage your pain over the long term is an important factor in controlling the disease and maintaining a good quality of life. Following are some sources of long-term pain relief.

Things You Can Do To Manage Arthritis Pain

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get 8 to 10 hours of sleep at night.
- Keep a daily diary of pain and mood changes to share with your physician.
- Choose a caring physician.
- Join a support group.
- Stay informed about new research on managing arthritis pain.

Arthritis Foundation

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Phone: 404-872-7100 or 800-283-7800 (free of charge)

or call your local chapter (listed in the telephone directory)

www.arthritis.org

This is the major voluntary organization devoted to arthritis. The foundation publishes a free brochure, *Coping with Pain*, and a monthly magazine for members that provides up-to-date information on all forms of arthritis. The foundation also can provide addresses and phone numbers for local chapters and physician and clinic referrals.