Arthritis: What Is It?

A common question I am often asked is: “What is arthritis and how did I get it?” The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis. There are other forms that are known as inflammatory arthritides, examples rheumatoid, lupus...

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint disease. Which means the covering of the joint has worn away. Lining each bone is a type of material called articular cartilage. This cartilage is glasslike and smooth, helping the bones glide with less resistance. Cartilage also protects the bones so they do not hit together.

Some joints, like the knee and parts of the spine, have thicker pieces of cartilage that act as a cushion called a meniscus. When there is a trauma or a repetitive movement that increases the friction in the joint, the cartilage can be damaged. If it does not repair itself or is continually damaged it begins to wear away.
There are many factors leading to the degeneration of the cartilage. As I mentioned before, a traumatic incident to a joint (a fall, twist, injured ligament, and meniscectomies) can cause the cartilage in the joint to be damaged. The injury will lead to uneven load distribution within the joint.

Genetics are another factor. If there is a family history of arthritis you will be more susceptible. A strong family history of arthritis could make you up to 65% more predisposed to having arthritis yourself. This means your cartilage may not be able to withstand as much pressure as someone else's and will breakdown more easily.

Being overweight will also make the cartilage more likely to be damaged. It is not because you're putting more pressure on the joints. The adipose tissue (fat cells), when in too much abundance, secrete chemicals which cause the cartilage cells (chondrocytes) to break down. If the cells that make the cartilage are destroyed, the cartilage is weaker and breaks down faster with less force or pressure. This will affect weight bearing and non-weight bearing joints alike, (ie fingers, hands, etc…).
Another factor is long-term joint pressure. A misaligned joint wears unevenly. The misalignment results in increased pressure on the cartilage. One part of the joint will have more pressure on it and the other will have less. If that joint is a weight-bearing joint, such as in the, hip, ankle, foot, or spine, it wears out faster. A misaligned joint (as well as a traumatically injured joint) will be more inflamed than a normal joint. The chemicals associated with inflammation will also damage the cartilage cell, resulting in their destruction.

Finally, age is another factor. As we age, our cartilage becomes less elastic. It will have less water making it less able to withstand pressure. Smaller traumas or misalignments can lead to more damage. Increased damage to the chondrocytes will lead to decreased cartilage.

By knowing the causes that lead to arthritis can help stop or reverse the process. You can take abnormal pressure off the joint with specific types of treatment, such as manipulation (adjustments), massage therapy, braces, exercises, or stretching. There are also nutritional answers (see article on nutrition for joint health). You don't have to accept arthritis!

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