Common arthritis questions answered

Population surveys indicate that more than a million Canadians have arthritis. Here are some quick questions and answers on this important subject.

What is arthritis?
Arthritis refers to inflammation of the joint. The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis, also known as degenerative joint disease. Other forms of arthritis include rheumatoid arthritis and gout.

Which joints are affected with osteoarthritis?
The weight-bearing joints and joints of the hands are those most often affected by degenerative changes associated with osteoarthritis.

What causes osteoarthritis pain?
Pain is caused by cartilage destruction followed by hardening and formation of large bone spurs in the joint margins. Cartilage serves an important role in joint function. Its gel-like nature provides protection to the ends of joints by acting as a shock absorber. Degeneration of cartilage is the hallmark feature of osteoarthritis. This degeneration causes inflammation, pain, deformity and limitation of joint motion.

What is the conventional medical treatment for osteoarthritis?
The primary drugs used to treat osteoarthritis are the so-called “nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs” (NSAIDs). Research indicates that although these drugs may produce short-term benefits, they actually accelerate the progression of joint destruction and cause more problems down the road. NSAIDs are also associated with side-effects, including gastrointestinal upset, headaches and dizziness, and are therefore recommended for only short periods of time.

How do NSAIDs accelerate joint destruction?
They inhibit the formation of compounds called glycosaminoglycans, which are responsible for maintaining the proper water content in the cartilage matrix, thereby helping cartilage keep its gel-like nature and shock-absorbing qualities. Clinical studies have shown that NSAIDs are associated with acceleration of osteoarthritis and increased joint destruction. Simply stated, aspirin and other NSAIDs appear to suppress symptoms but accelerate the progression of osteoarthritis. Their use should be avoided.

What can one use instead of NSAIDs?
Glucosamine sulphate! Glucosamine is a simple molecule that can be manufactured in the body. It stimulates the manufacture of glycosaminoglycans, key structural components of cartilage. It appears that as some people age, they lose the ability to manufacture sufficient levels of glucosamine. As a result, cartilage loses its ability to act as a shock absorber. The inability to manufacture glucosamine has been suggested as the major factor leading to osteoarthritis.

Have there been clinical studies with glucosamine sulphate?
Yes. Glucosamine sulphate has been the subject of more than 300 scientific investigations and more than 20 double-blind studies. The benefits of glucosamine sulphate for

Herbs Relieve Pain and Inflammation
Many herbs contain powerful anti-inflammatory substances called salicylates that are converted in the body into salicylic acid, which interacts with enzymes that mediate inflammation. These salicylates work at reducing inflammation, swelling and fever.

Herbs are very effective for arthritis and rheumatism where there is pain and chronic joint inflammation. They can help control fevers, relieve neuralgia, headaches, backache, nerve pain, toothaches, injuries and pain in general. Notable herbs high in salicylates include willow (Salix spp.), poplar (Populus spp.), meadowsweet (Filipendula ulmaria), crampbark (Virburnum opulus) and wintergreen (Gaultheria procumbens).

—Rob MacDonald, CHT
osteoarthritis are impressive. Head-to-head double-blind studies have shown glucosamine sulphate produces better long-term results than NSAIDs in relieving pain and inflammation of osteoarthritis and is virtually without side-effects. The recommended dosage is 1,500 milligrams daily.

Can cartilage regenerate?
Yes. If there is still cartilage between the joints, it can be thickened and improved, based on results of a recently completed clinical trial in which glucosamine sulphate supplementation actually increased cartilage thickness by 37 per cent as determined by ultrasound.

Homeopathy for Arthritis
Drugs such as Celebrex, Naprosyn and Vioxx treat arthritis by suppressing the inflammatory process of the body. This drives the disease inward and causes side-effects. Homeopathy does it differently. By stimulating the body to heal itself, homeopathy stops unresolved inflammation by making it unnecessary.

Choosing a homeopathic medicine for gout, rheumatism or osteoarthritis requires careful selection, matching the symptom pattern to the appropriate remedy. For example, Rhus toxicodendron will treat arthritis that is like a "rusty gate." It has aching and stiffness in bed, at rest and on initial movement, which soon disappears with continued activity. It is soothed by heat but made worse by weather changes.

—Stephen Malthouse, MD
wholistic healing

How long before results are seen?
With glucosamine sulphate supplementation, most people will experience significant improvement within four weeks. However, the longer it is used, the more obvious the results. The effects are cumulative.

What about chondroitin sulphate?
Chondroitin sulphate is a very large molecule composed of repeating units of glucosamine and glucoronic acid with sulphur molecules attached. Like glucosamine sulphate, there is some evidence that chondroitin sulphate stimulates the manufacture of cartilage components. There is no evidence of additional benefits provided by a combination of glucosamine and chondroitin over glucosamine alone, but people do take both. Several double-blind studies have shown that chondroitin sulphate reduces joint pain and improves joint function in osteoarthritic knees, hips or hands, but overall results do not seem to occur as quickly or be as significant as with glucosamine sulphate. The typical dosage for chondroitin sulphate is 1,200 mg daily.

What about MSM?
MSM (methyl-sulphonyl-methane) is the major form of sulphur in the body. Sulphur is an important element for all body tissues. It is an especially important nutrient for joint tissue, where it stabilizes the connective tissue matrix of cartilage, tendons and ligaments. As far back as the 1930s, researchers demonstrated that individuals with arthritis are commonly deficient in this essential nutrient. Restoring sulphur levels brought about significant benefit to these patients. While there has not been enough clinical research on the therapeutic value of MSM in arthritis, many people with various forms of arthritis (both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis), as well as muscle pain and fibromyalgia, report significant benefits with supplementation. The typical dosage is 1,500 to 4,000 mg daily.

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