

Arthritis

Arthritis is an inflammation of the joints that causes pain and immobility, ranging from mild to severe. In Ireland around 915,000 people are living with arthritis, making it the single biggest cause of disability.

There are over 100 types of arthritis but the most common forms are osteoarthritis (OA), rheumatoid arthritis (RA) (also known as rheumatic arthritis) and fibromyalgia. Although many symptoms of arthritis are shared across the conditions, like pain, fatigue and inflammation, there are many unique to each disease too.

No arthritis cure exists at present and it is not known what causes it. However, there are many medical and non-medical arthritis treatments available that can help you to control your arthritis symptoms.

Types of Arthritis

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common of all types of arthritis. It usually develops gradually, over several years, and affects a number of different joints. The cause is unknown, but it does appear more in females than males and often starts after the menopause.

For some people the symptoms of osteoarthritis are so subtle and develop over such a long time that they are hardly noticed. For others, problems may worsen over a number of months or years. When the overall disease process finishes, joints may look knobbly, but are usually less painful. In some cases they become pain free and, despite their appearance, still enable you to carry out most everyday tasks.

Osteoarthritis used to be considered wear and tear arthritis, but it is now understood that there are many more factors than age and use that contribute to the development of osteoarthritis – including obesity, past injury and genetics.

Gout

Gout is one of the oldest types of arthritis where crystals build up in the body and cause joints to become very painful. Once treated, gout is not a problem for most people. Gout symptoms are caused by uric acid crystals in the joints. We all have some uric acid in our blood but most of us pass this out in urine. When there is too much uric acid in the blood, it can form crystals. These crystals can form around joints, cause inflammation, swelling and severe pain.

Treatments and Care

Diagnosis

While pain, stiffness and swelling in your joints may indicate just a slight strain, it could also be an early sign of arthritis. Your GP will make an arthritis diagnosis based on your symptoms, a physical examination and medical tests (bloods and x-rays). In some cases, your GP will be able to give you an immediate diagnosis or they may have to refer you to a rheumatologist or orthopaedic surgeon or pain specialist.

Being diagnosed with arthritis can be a very intimidating experience. Initial feelings of fear and anger are a completely normal but, by taking the right steps, a diagnosis of arthritis does not have to alter your quality of life.

Treatments

The treatment and research into arthritis is known as rheumatology. Striking the right balance of treatments often differs from person to person.

Medication

Arthritis medication is a fact of life for most people living with the condition. There are:

- Drugs which control the symptoms of your disease. These are used to treat most types of arthritis, including osteoarthritis and they alleviate specific symptoms such as pain, swelling and stiffness. They include painkillers and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

- Drugs which affect the disease itself. These drugs affect the progression of the disease through, for instance, suppressing the immune system (the body's own defence system). They can also control symptoms.

Surgery

Many people with arthritis find that having surgery brings about a dramatic reduction in their pain, and an improvement in their mobility and quality of life. A wide range of types of surgery can help people with arthritis, from small procedures (such as operations to remove cysts or nodules), to major surgery (which includes total joint replacement). Hip and knee replacements are very common procedures, especially in people over 60 years.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy plays an important role in treating arthritis by providing improved mobility, strength and flexibility. It is often used along with medication. Treatment and general advice may include exercise, hydrotherapy, mobilisation techniques, relaxation techniques, pain relief, TENS, splinting, walking aids and advice on posture. It is normal to have around six sessions with a physiotherapist.

Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy allows people with arthritis to exercise the joints and muscles while being supported by extra warm water. The temperature of the water aids muscle relaxation and eases pain in the joints. Because the water supports your weight, the range of movement in your joints should also increase.

Scientific studies have shown that hydrotherapy can improve strength and general fitness in people with various types of arthritis. In general, hydrotherapy is one of the safest treatments for arthritis and back pain.

Occupational Therapy

If you are experiencing difficulty with day-to-day tasks like washing, dressing, cooking and cleaning you may benefit from visiting an occupational therapist. They have a wealth of expertise on what equipment is available to assist you with a particular task. They may also be able to supply, on temporary loan, some of the more expensive items.

Adaptations may include:

- ergonomic cutlery
- kettle tippers
- bath rails
- grabbers
- walkers
- stair lifts

Complementary Therapies

As their name suggests, these types of therapies are designed to complement and work alongside conventional medicine and treatments - not replace them. They concentrate on treating the whole person. Therapies include acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, yoga and reflexology. Many people claim they can help alleviate symptoms such as pain and stiffness, as well as counteract some of the unwanted side effects of drugs.

Resources:

