



Arthritis Info-sheet for seniors

There are many forms of arthritis. Osteoarthritis is the most common form and the most frequent joint disorder in seniors. It is also one of the major reasons why seniors limit their activities.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is due to the wearing down of cartilage, which is the material that cushions the ends of the bones. Some researchers believe that when the joints are unable to react properly to stress, the cartilage is damaged. This leads to the development of arthritis.

The joints most commonly affected by arthritis are weight-bearing joints, such as feet, knees, hips and spine. Other joints, such as finger and thumb joints, may also be affected.

While approximately the same percentage of men and women have arthritis when all ages are considered, it affects them in different ways. The disease seems to affect women's hands, knees, ankles and feet, whereas in men, the symptoms are more likely to appear in the hips, wrist and spine. Also, women are more likely to experience symptoms in more than one joint than are men.

It is estimated that 85% of Canadians will be affected by osteoarthritis by age 70.

What are the warning signs?

The warning signs of arthritis include:

- pain in or around a joint
- stiffness or problems moving a joint
- swelling (sometimes) in a joint

Many people with arthritis do not experience any symptoms in the initial stages of the disease. It often takes a long time for the disease to progress and the condition can remain stable for long periods of time.

Risk factors

The key risk factors for the development of arthritis are age, excess weight, injury and complications from other conditions, heredity and lack of physical activity.

Age

While age is not a cause of arthritis, this disease affects a very large number of seniors. You can't stop the years from adding up, but you can improve the way your body ages by adopting a healthy lifestyle and making exercise a part of your everyday life.

Excess weight

Many studies have identified a link between obesity and arthritis. Excess weight puts extra stress on weight-bearing joints, especially the knees. A 10-15 lb. weight loss can reduce pain in the knees.



Injury and complications from other conditions

Arthritis can develop because of previous joint injuries or joint inflammation, hereditary joint conditions, or diseases that affect the joints (such as diabetes).

Joint injury can also occur when joints are put under repetitive, high impact stress for long periods of time. Some specific exercises, sports or occupations may increase the likelihood of arthritis. For example, hand arthritis is more frequent among boxers, and elbow arthritis is more likely to develop in pneumatic drill operators.

Heredity

Some very specific types of arthritis can result from hereditary factors. Some families may pass on the tendency for defective cartilage; others may pass on slight defects in the way joints fit together.

Lack of physical activity

Arthritis symptoms such as pain, stiffness, fatigue and fear of harming oneself often lead people with arthritis to avoid exercise. Ironically, inactivity can worsen arthritis problems.

Prevention

While we are unable to change some of the factors which make one susceptible to arthritis, such as age, sex and heredity, it is possible to reduce the likelihood of developing this disease by adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise (such as walking, cycling and swimming) to strengthen supporting muscles and maintain joint mobility. Weight control can also help reduce stress on the joints and spine.

Coping with arthritis

Alleviating pain

Medication can sometimes be used to alleviate pain. The application of heat can help relieve some of the joint pain and soreness, and the application of cold can help reduce swelling. Severe, advanced arthritis may be treated with surgery.

Reducing risk and progression

Protecting joints by avoiding excess mechanical stress in daily life is important. This can be accomplished by pacing tasks, using assistive devices such as canes, grab bars and larger handles, and by proper joint positioning.

Consult a physiotherapist to establish an exercise program adapted to your individual abilities, needs and goals.

For more information

The Arthritis Society
1-800-321-1433; www.arthritis.ca

Information is also available via Internet:

www.canadian-health-network.ca
www.hc-sc.gc.ca
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
www.agenet.com

Our thanks to the Arthritis Society for its contribution to the preparation of this Info-Sheet

*Division of Aging and Seniors
Public Health Agency of Canada
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines*

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2000 (Reprint, Nov. 2005)
Cat. no. H30-11/8-2E ISBN 0-662-28785-1