

Arthritis x3

Arthritis is a common cause of stiffness and swelling in aging adults.

by *Kay Ledbetter*

Arthritis is one of the most common diseases in this country, affecting millions of adults and half of all people age 65 and older, says a Texas AgriLife Extension Service specialist.

Arthritis literally means “joint inflammation,” says Andrew Crocker, AgriLife Extension program gerontology specialist. However, there are many kinds of arthritis, each with different symptoms and treatments.

Arthritis can attack almost any part of the body, Crocker says. Some forms of arthritis cause changes you can see and feel — with symptoms ranging from swelling, warmth and redness. Other types have fewer symptoms but still slowly cause damage.

The three most common types of arthritis in older adults are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and gout, he said.

Of the three, osteoarthritis is the most common, Crocker says. It starts when cartilage, the tissue that cushions bones, begins to wear away. At its worst, all of the cartilage in a joint wears away, leaving bones that rub against each other.

“Symptoms may range from stiffness and mild pain that comes and goes to severe pain that persists when you are at rest,” he says. “Sometimes osteoarthritis causes you to feel stiff when you have not moved in a while, but the stiffness goes away when you move.”

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease, meaning the body attacks the lining of a joint just as it would if it were trying to protect itself from an infection, Crocker says. The disease generally leads to inflammation, pain, swelling and stiffness, and can occur in many different joints at the same time.

“If you have rheumatoid arthritis in a joint on one side of the body, the same joint on the other side of the body will probably have it,” he says. “People with rheumatoid arthritis often do not feel well, often being tired or running a fever.”

Gout is one of the most painful forms of arthritis, Crocker says. It begins when crystals of uric acid form in the joints, leading to swelling, redness, heat, pain



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► **Arthritis can attack almost any part of the body. Sometimes symptoms are readily apparent; sometimes they're not.**

and stiffness in the joint. Eating foods like shellfish, liver, dried beans, peas, anchovies or gravy can bring on gout attacks.

“Gout is most often a problem in the big toe, but it can affect other joints, including your ankle, elbow, knee, wrist, hand or other toes,” he says. “Swelling may cause the skin to pull tightly around the joint and make the area red or purple and very tender.”

“If any arthritis symptoms last longer than two weeks, see your health provider,” Crocker advises. “If you have a fever, feel physically ill, suddenly have a swollen joint or have problems using your joint, see him or her sooner.”

Treatments

Medications may help with the pain and swelling. Acetaminophen and some nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are sold without a prescription, he says. These are medications like Tylenol® ibuprofen or naproxen. Read the warnings that come with the drug, and talk to a health provider about how to best use them for arthritis pain.

There are some treatments specific for each common type of arthritis, including prescription drugs or steroid injections, Crocker says. A health provider may recommend a treatment after determining which type of arthritis is present.

Along with taking the right medicine and properly resting joints, exercise is a good way to stay fit, keep muscles strong and control arthritis symptoms, he says. Daily exercise helps keep joints moving, lessens pain and makes muscles around the joints stronger.

Three types of exercise work best for arthritis:

- Range-of-motion exercises, like dancing, relieve stiffness, improve flexibility and help keep joints moving.
- Strengthening exercises, such as weight training, strengthen muscles to support and protect joints. Be sure to move in a slow, steady manner — do not bounce. A gentle stretch at the end of each motion is all right, but there should be no pain.
- Aerobic or endurance exercises, like bicycle riding, improve overall health and well-being, and may lessen swelling in some joints.

“You might find comfort by applying heat or cold, soaking in a warm bath, or swimming in a heated pool,” Crocker says. “Your health provider may suggest surgery when damage to your joints becomes disabling or when other treatments do not help with pain. Surgeons can repair or replace these joints with artificial ones.”

He suggests that pain and arthritis shouldn't be accepted as part of growing older.

“You and your health provider can work together to safely lessen pain and stiffness and prevent more serious damage to your joints,” Crocker says.

For more information, go to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases web site at www.niams.nih.gov.



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