

Causes of Arthritis and Options for Relief

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

Arthritis affects close to 30 million Americans and can cause serious pain and discomfort. Fortunately, there are things a person can do to alleviate some of the symptoms.

Arthritis is the inflammation of one or more joints, causing pain and stiffness. This discomfort tends to be greater in the morning or after a period of inactivity.

In a normal joint, there is cartilage between the bones to serve as a sort of shock absorber and allows the bones to move freely past each other as the joint is bent and straightened. There is also a synovial membrane that secretes a fluid that lubricates the joint and keeps the cartilage healthy. With arthritis, one or the other of these is not functioning properly.

The two most common types of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis is when the cartilage between bones in a joint wears away leaving bone to rub against bone. Rheumatoid arthritis occurs when the synovial membrane becomes inflamed. This inflammation can cause pain and swelling.

Certain factors increase the risk of developing arthritis. Some types are hereditary so family history increases risk. The older a person is, the higher the risk. Women are more likely to get rheumatoid arthritis than men. Previous joint injury can lead to arthritis in the effected joint. Obese people who carry a large amount of extra weight put added stress on joints, increasing their risk for arthritis.

Although there are medications that may help reduce symptoms, there are also lifestyle changes. Applying hot or cold packs may help sometimes. Losing excess weight in someone who is obese relieves the joints of the extra burden those pounds cause. And exercise can help keep joints flexible and lower discomfort.

Different types of exercise work best for different kinds of arthritis. For osteoarthritis, water aerobics, swimming, and muscle-strengthening exercises keep joints flexible and muscles properly helping out the body's structure. For rheumatoid arthritis, it helps to carefully move each joint through its full range of motion each day. Move arthritic joints periodically throughout the day and change positions from time to time when resting to avoid stiffness. And be sure to consult your health care team before starting any new exercise routine.

(Written November 4, 2011)