Many Seniors are Impacted by Arthritis

*Tammy Roberts, MS., RD., LD
Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Arthritis is an umbrella name for a group of diseases that affect the joints. There are more than 100 individual diseases that the term arthritis refers to. The three most common are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia.

Osteoarthritis is referred to as “wear and tear” arthritis. It is caused by the breakdown of cartilage as we age. When cartilage breaks down the bones rub against each other causing stiffness, pain, and loss of movement.

The pain of rheumatoid arthritis is caused by inflammation of the joints. The exact cause is unknown but in a person with rheumatoid arthritis, their immune system is attacking their own body tissues. Rheumatoid arthritis most often starts in middle age.

Fibromyalgia causes muscle pain and fatigue. People with fibromyalgia have specific places on their body such as the neck, shoulders, back, hips, arms or legs that are tender to the touch. They may also experience insomnia, morning stiffness, headaches, numbness in hands or feet, and problems with thinking and memory.

Nearly one in three adults or 66 million people is estimated to have arthritis which is the second leading cause of disability. Any person at any age can be diagnosed with arthritis but more women than men are affected.

It is estimated that 23 million people in the United States have arthritis but have not been diagnosed. It is important to see a physician and be properly diagnosed with arthritis because different forms of arthritis require different treatment. Proper treatment can help keep joints in the best possible condition and that means less pain for the patient.

Eat Right and Exercise to Manage Arthritis

Two common recommendations for people with arthritis are to eat healthfully and to get plenty of exercise. According to the Arthritis Foundation, there isn’t enough research to warrant recommendations for specific amounts of certain foods to combat the disease. They do recommend that people with arthritis aim for a healthy weight and make healthy food choices. This means choosing a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats and low fat dairy products.

Exercise has many benefits for the person with arthritis. It can help with mental outlook and with weight management. In addition, physical activity can strengthen the muscles around joints minimizing the friction between bones. This helps to decrease joint swelling and pain. Often, people who exercise experience increased energy and stamina.