

## **Osteoarthritis and Joint Pain**

Many people suffer with joint pain and stiffness, especially as they get older, and osteoarthritis is a very common problem that can be very debilitating. It is a condition that can affect any joint of the body but it is the weight-bearing joints, such as the knees, hips and spine, that are often more vulnerable to arthritic pain.

The arthritic, or degenerative, process that affects joints actually starts in our 40's, however, most people have few problems at this stage and, indeed, many older people in their 70's and 80's, despite having degenerative changes in their joints, have little pain.

Osteoarthritis is a progressive disease that causes a wearing of the smooth cartilage within the joint and the soft tissues surrounding the joints can become thickened and inflamed. These changes can be painful and lead to joint stiffening. Factors that can affect the onset of osteoarthritis include age, previous injury, genetics, weight and lifestyle.

However, many people find that their symptoms come and go over time with intermittent episodes of pain, stiffness and possibly swelling. The underlying degree of cartilage wearing, in itself, changes little over time and does not determine the level of pain that you may experience. Some people with mild degenerative changes may have episodes of severe pain and others with more severe arthritis may have periods when their joint is no more than uncomfortable.

Presently, the only 'cure' for an arthritic knee or hip joint is replacement, however, many people do not need this type of surgery. For these people there is a need to manage their arthritis, especially if they are experiencing a painful episode. This can be done through the use of heat applied to the joint, for example, to help with pain and inflammation along with painkillers or anti-inflammatory medication. What is important, however, is to keep gently active and mobile. Arthritic joints do not tolerate too much inactivity, such as sitting, as this causes the joint to stiffen further. Equally, too much physical activity can aggravate the joint. Activity in moderation is usually the best option.

Physiotherapy can be beneficial in helping with pain and inflammation caused by an arthritic joint as well as being able to advise the person about self-help and exercise. Many of my patients have degenerative basis to their pain and is the reason they book an appointment to see me. However, they rarely say to me 'I have an arthritic joint' they say 'my knee hurts' or 'my back hurts'. This is where treatment can be effective. You cannot reverse the wear and tear process, however, you can assist with the inflammatory state of the joint, stiff joints can be mobilised and tight muscles can be stretched. By tackling these elements, as well as teaching self help techniques, many patients get relief that allows them to function more normally with less pain.