

Arthritis: Avoidance and Treatment

Osteoarthritis (OA) is damage to, and inflammation of the joints and bone ends due to insufficient or damaged cartilage within a joint. Joints become sore, swollen, misshapen and lack mobility. OA generally progresses with age because as we get older we start to wear away the cartilage in our joints quicker than we replace it. This cartilage is needed to protect (cushion) the ends of the bones, and to ensure smooth joint movement; without it the bone ends rub together damaging each other.

It is a common misconception that only elderly individuals get OA. Many middle-aged people are already getting osteoarthritis; even younger people may get it if they injure a joint or wear away their cartilage at an excessively fast rate by work or sport. This is particularly common in the knees of people who run on roads and those who play racquet sports, due to the extra wear and tear on the cartilage of repetitive 'high impact' through the knees. There are a number of factors, which effect when or whether you will get OA and many people are at much higher risk. These risk factors include: genetics, sport, being overweight, work, lifestyle, mobility of joints, foot pronation, diet, and your career type.

Many people believe that as OA is due to the aging process it is unavoidable and must simply be 'put up with' (with the possibility of taking anti-inflammatories or painkillers to ease any discomfort or swelling). However, although it's true OA is due to the aging process, there is a lot we can do to help prevent it, or slow its progression!

What can be done to prevent and/or treat osteoarthritis?

Treatment

Light Manipulation/mobilisation (such as used in Thai Yoga Massage & Shiatsu) increases the mobility, health, function and also circulation within joints, encouraging efficient cartilage production and so helping to avoid and/or treat osteoarthritis. Myofascial release (including traction techniques) is also very effective at breaking down the fascial restrictions that develop within & around joints to ease pain and improve function. Much of the pain associated with OA may also be due to painful 'trigger points' in the muscle, fascia and tendons around the joint; these can be effectively treated with trigger point therapy. Heat along with deep tissue massage and advanced stretching may also be indicated in the treatment of OA.

Supplementation

There are a number of excellent supplements on the market, which work in a number of ways to treat and prevent OA. People would be wise to start taking preventative supplements from the age of 50; earlier if arthritis runs in the family or their work or sports cause extra wear and tear on the joints. I recommend taking a supplement which contains glucosamine, chondroitin, MSM and also preferably supporting nutrients such as manganese, silicone, boron, magnesium and vitamins C, D & B6 (not so important if taking a quality multivitamin). These nutrients facilitate cartilage & synovial fluid production, joint health & flexibility, while reducing pain and inflammation. I also recommend finding a glucosamine supplement containing ginger or turmeric extract (curacumin) in it as this will increase its effectiveness and taking the supplements with food to aid absorption.

Omega 3 fish oil also helps support joint health, reduces inflammation and helps keep the joints supple. I recommend taking 2000 mg per day, or 1000 mg if you eat plenty of fish. Bear in mind that if your glucosamine tablets contain fish oil/cod liver oil then this means they contain less of other nutrients; I therefore recommend taking a separate fish oil supplement. I recommend taking around 1000mg of glucosamine/day to help prevent osteoarthritis or 2000-3000mg to treat existing osteoarthritis. Other products which may help with the pain, swelling and inflammation of osteoarthritis include Boswellia, Devils Claw, Green Lipped Muscle, Cherry extract, Rosehip and Hyaluronic Acid. Many experts also feel diet is very important in dealing with OA; please see a nutritionist or my 'recommended reading' link for more information on this topic.

Yoga, Mobility Exercises and Self Treatment

Yoga is excellent at keeping the joints mobile and healthy, which helps to slow the progression of osteoarthritis. However, many yoga exercises may not be possible for individuals who all ready have advanced osteoarthritis and/or chronic pain conditions. Some yoga teachers have developed classes specifically for less mobile individuals, or may be able to adapt or leave out the more difficult poses so it is worth considering even if you are all ready having mobility problems (remember you will improve with time). Gentle, non impact sports such as swimming, tai chi and some martial arts are also beneficial in avoiding and/or improving osteoarthritis. Specific remedial exercises and stretches can also be very helpful for specific joints (ask your therapist, yoga teacher or personal trainer for advice). Self treatment of the hands can also be very helpful (ask a Thai Yoga Massage or Shiatsu practitioner for advice), especially if combined with a warming, stimulating balm such as 'Tui-Warming & Easing Balm'. Heat (eg. water, lamp, heat pad) also stimulates circulation, cartilage production and eases osteoarthritis symptoms (don't use heat if you have Rheumatoid Arthritis or excessive joint inflammation).

Rheumatoid (& Inflammatory) Arthritis

Rheumatoid Arthritis has similar symptoms to osteoarthritis but is a very different condition which requires different treatment & advice. RA is a systemic inflammatory autoimmune disorder which affects tissues, organs and primarily the synovial joints. The sufferers own immune system attacks the joints damaging bone & cartilage, inflaming the tissues and causing granulation tissue within the joint. Treatment to the joint/s themselves can be helpful but should not be done during a 'flare up' as it may increase inflammation and pain. Trigger point therapy to the muscles/tendons around the joint can ease pain and mobility at all times though. Glucosamine supplements (as for OA) may limit cartilage damage and Fish Oil (or Flax Seed Oil if vegetarian) is highly recommended due to its inflammatory action. The anti inflammatory herbs Devils Claw, Boswellia & Cherry extract may be particularly useful, as would the pineapple enzyme Bromelain.

Suffers of RA should avoid high impact sports as they may further inflame the joints. Heat should also be avoided during 'flare ups' as this will increase inflammation (try cold packs or frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel instead). Creams and balms using cooling, anti-inflammatory essential oils or plant extracts (eg. Arnica Oil, Hypericum, Yarrow, Chamomile) are recommended such as Tui's 'Cooling & Soothing Balm'. Avoiding food intolerances and altering the diet can also be extremely beneficial at reducing RA, see a nutritionist for advice. Many experts also believe autoimmune diseases such as RA and CFS have a very strong emotional link so addressing emotional problems with counselling, trauma healing, stress management and relaxation techniques may prove beneficial in reducing RA. Other sufferers have found acupuncture to address blockages in the body's energy channels (meridians) has helped ease the condition.

e: kclark@altonadvancedbodywork.co.uk

w: www.altonadvancedbodywork.co.uk