

# Arthritis - Are You Crippled by Ignorance?

by Patt Stock

Rheumatism is a general term for pain and stiffness in the muscular-skeletal system. Muscles, ligaments and tendons and the skeleton are all very interdependent upon one another for their shape, support and function. Trouble in any one will usually have an effect upon the rest.

Arthritis simply means inflammation of a joint and may be considered a form of rheumatism in a joint or joints have become inflamed. There are many different forms of arthritis - around a hundred different types - with a variety of causes. We are not going to explore them in detail in this article, but we will give a broad view of them.

Arthritis is derived from Greek - arthro means joint while "itis" stands for inflammation. Arthritis is the name for a group of conditions involving damage to the joints of the body.

## OSTEOARTHRITIS

Probably the most common or at least the best-known form is Osteoarthritis (OA) or Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD). It tends to affect the large weight-bearing joints such as hip and knee and is often found in one joint rather than multiple sites. It may be the result of trauma, infection, obesity, aging, instability, an after effect of surgery, or a "perk" of certain occupations such as farming and horticulture. Often described as "wear and tear" and is one of the major causes of joint problems involving erosion of bone and cartilage in your joints. It's also usually really painful..

Osteoarthritis is frequently thought of as an older person's disease, although in reality it can affect younger people, especially sportspeople who put their joints under a lot of strain to maintain the levels of fitness required for them. This causes wear and tear at the joint surfaces. Footballers regularly damage their knees, causing premature muscular-skeletal changes. In some cases there's also a hereditary factor. It's most often seen in the over 60 age group and can be confirmed clinically or with x-rays where bony changes such as spurs or osteophytes can be seen.

It may also be seen in the hands and feet in which case nodules, or Heberdens nodes, may be seen on the joints at the ends of the fingers and frequently runs in families. Bunions may be present on the feet.

## RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Another form of arthritis is Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and this is 3 times more common in women than men. This is a disease where the immune system starts to attack itself.

RA has the potential to be a significantly disabling disease with destructive changes to the joints but modern medication has turned it into a much less crippling illness. Hands and wrists, legs and feet plus the neck are often affected. Left untreated, the lining of the joints thickens and excess synovial fluid is produced, which in turn alters the lubrication of the joint through changes to the composition of the fluid. Antibodies attack articular cartilage and gradually destroy it. Bone surfaces may become exposed and fuse to give considerable loss of function.

Initial symptoms are pain, tenderness, swelling, stiffness. These are often in the smaller joints and will affect joints symmetrically. So if you've got it in your right hand, then your left is probably affected too. It can happen at any age with the most common occurrence being between 40 and 50 years of age.

If you think you might have RA then it's important to get prompt attention as early treatment can have a big impact. Blood tests and x-rays are used to diagnose the disease. Today's medicine can go a long way towards preventing deformity, disability and instability and there are many effective drugs available that control it but sadly they can't cure it.

## GOUT

Another form of arthritis is Gout. This almost always occurs in men and is characterised by raised levels of uric acid in the bloodstream - either because your body is producing too much uric acid, or you can't remove it once it's there.

Crystals of uric acid build up on the cartilage of your joints, tendons and surrounding tissues. The pain is excruciating with a sudden burning pain often in the foot, where there is swelling, redness, heat and stiffness, often in the big toe.

Traditionally Gout is associated with rich food intake and grain alcohol. Meat, game, scallops, offal are often thought to be implicated because of their high purine levels. A plant based diet seems to be low in purine levels.

Knowing a little about the conditions affecting you is the first step to understanding what is happening and can often take away a lot of the fear and uncertainty. The next step is to get some professional advice on the specifics of your own unique circumstance and to work with your therapist to develop a plan for managing the condition so it doesn't take over your life.