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Arthritis

Arthritis is common. There are many different causes of arthritis and so all age groups can be affected. Some causes of arthritis only cause joint problems for a short time and there are no long-lasting problems. Other causes of arthritis may cause pain and difficulties for a long period of time or even permanently.

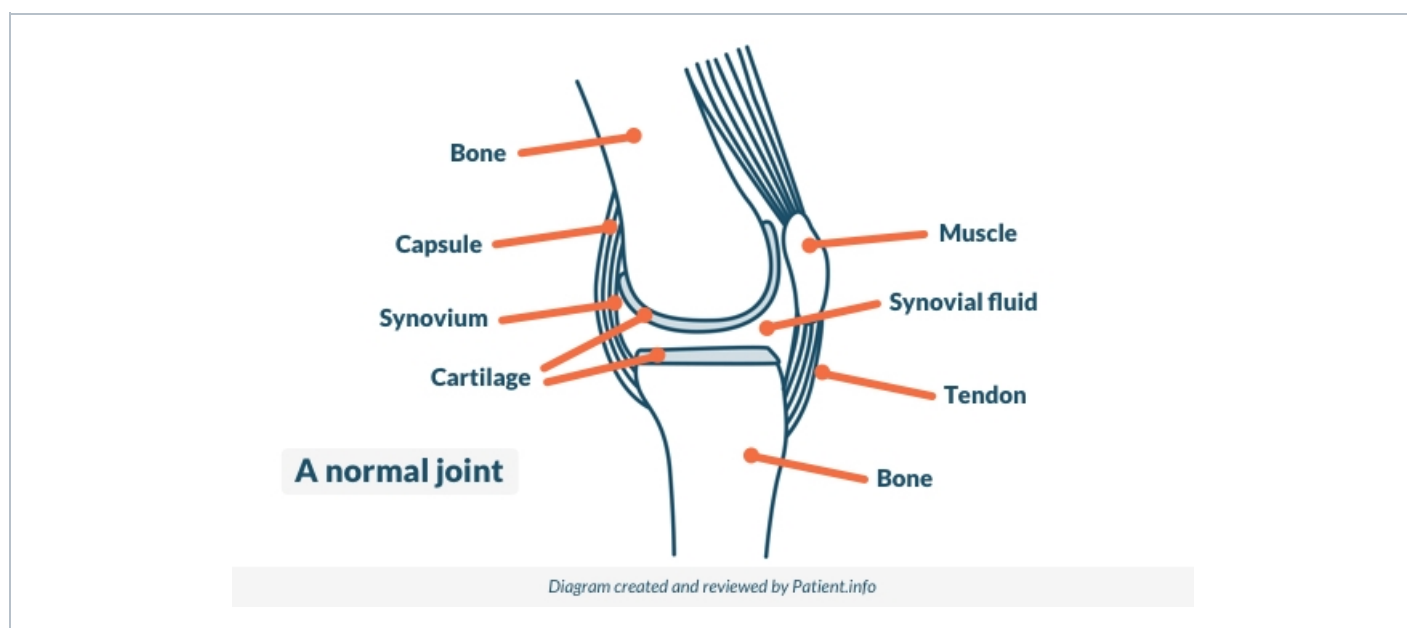
If you have any joint problems you should see your GP to find out the cause of the arthritis. You will often need some investigations, such as blood tests and X-rays. You may also need to be seen by a specialist, depending on the likely cause of arthritis.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis means inflammation of joints. Arthritis is very common. There are many different causes of arthritis. Children and adults of all ages can be affected by arthritis.

Arthritis may affect just one joint, a few joints or many joints. Each cause of arthritis tends to have a typical pattern in terms of which joints are affected and the age of people most likely to be affected.

Understanding joints



A joint is situated where two bones meet. Joints allow movement and flexibility of various parts of the body. The movement of the bones is caused by muscles which pull on tendons that are attached to bone. Cartilage covers the end of bones. Between the cartilage of two bones that form a joint there is a small amount of thick fluid called synovial fluid. This lubricates the joint, which allows smooth movement between the bones.

The synovium is the tissue that surrounds a joint. Synovial fluid is made by cells of the synovium. The outer part of the synovium is called the capsule. This is tough, gives the joint stability, and stops the bones from moving out of joint. Surrounding ligaments and muscles also help to give support and stability to joints.

What are the causes of arthritis?

The two most common types of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. However, there are many different causes of arthritis.

The following list includes some of the common conditions that mainly affect joints. For further information, each condition has its own separate leaflet.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) causes inflammation, pain, and swelling of joints. Persistent inflammation over time can damage affected joints. The severity can vary from mild to severe. The earlier treatment is started, the less joint damage is likely to occur.

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) causes pain and stiffness in joints. Symptoms may be helped by exercises, some physical devices and treatments, and losing weight if you are overweight.

Septic arthritis

Septic arthritis is an infection in a joint. Symptoms include pain and tenderness over a joint, pain on moving the joint, and feeling unwell. It is an uncommon infection, but very serious. Emergency treatment in hospital is needed.

Ankylosing spondylitis

Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is a form of arthritis. It mainly affects the lower back. Other joints and other parts of the body are sometimes affected. Treatment includes regular exercise and anti-inflammatory medicines. The severity of AS varies from mild to severe. An eye complication called uveitis can be serious but can be treated successfully if treatment is given promptly.

Gout

Gout causes attacks of pain and swelling in one or more joints. An anti-inflammatory painkiller usually eases an attack quickly. Lifestyle factors may reduce the risk of having gout attacks. These include losing weight (if overweight), eating a healthy diet, and not drinking much alcohol or sugar-sweetened soft drinks.

Calcium pyrophosphate deposition

Calcium pyrophosphate is a substance produced in the cartilages of the joints. It can become deposited as crystals on joint tissues. This is called **calcium pyrophosphate deposition (CPPD)**. CPPD can cause a number of problems of which the most well known is pseudogout. This is almost identical to gout, causing attacks of pain and swelling in one or more joints. Some people get damage to the joint, causing a type of long-term arthritis. CPPD may cause no symptoms and is sometimes picked up on an X-ray done for an unrelated condition. Unlike gout, there is no special therapy for pseudogout.

Psoriatic arthritis

Psoriatic arthritis causes inflammation, pain, and swelling of joints in some people who have psoriasis. Other parts of the body may also be affected. For example, inflammation may also affect tendons and ligaments. The severity can vary from mild to severe. In some cases, affected joints become damaged which can cause disability.

Reactive arthritis

Reactive arthritis means that you develop inflammation in joints after you have had an infection in some other part of the body. Other symptoms usually develop in addition to the arthritis. Symptoms commonly last 3-6 months. In some cases the arthritis persists long-term. The term Reiter's syndrome is used when arthritis, urethritis and conjunctivitis occur at the same time.

Juvenile idiopathic arthritis

Juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) is a condition in which joint inflammation occurs in children under the age of 16 years. It lasts for at least six weeks. Arthritis causes inflammation, pain and swelling of the affected joints. The severity can vary from mild to severe. The earlier the treatment is started, the less joint damage is likely to occur.

Some conditions affecting many parts of the body, including joints

Examples include:

Systemic lupus erythematosus

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) can cause various symptoms, the most common being joint pains, skin rashes and tiredness. Problems with kidneys and other organs can occur in severe cases.

Gut (bowel) conditions

Some gut conditions, especially inflammatory bowel diseases such as **Crohn's disease** and **ulcerative colitis**, may cause arthritis.

Some conditions similar to arthritis but not causing joint inflammation

Examples include:

Cervical spondylosis

Cervical spondylosis is a 'wear and tear' of the bones (vertebrae) and discs in the neck. It is a normal part of ageing and does not cause symptoms in many people. However, it is sometimes a cause of neck pain. Symptoms tend to come and go. In severe cases, the degeneration may cause irritation or pressure on the spinal nerve roots or spinal cord. This can cause arm or leg symptoms.

Polymyalgia rheumatica

Polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR) causes pain, stiffness and tenderness in large muscles, typically around the shoulders, upper arms and hips. The cause is not known. Some people with PMR develop a related condition called giant cell arteritis (GCA) which can be more serious.

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia causes pains and tenderness in many areas of the body, and tiredness. You may also have other symptoms.

What are the symptoms of arthritis?

The symptoms of arthritis vary depending on the nature and severity of the underlying cause. The symptoms include:

- Joint pain, tenderness and stiffness.
- Restricted movement of the joints.
- Warmth and red skin over the affected joint.
- Weakness and muscle wasting around the joint.

Can arthritis be treated?

There are treatments available for all forms of arthritis. However, the treatment will depend on the cause of arthritis. Treatments may include medicines, physiotherapy and surgery. Some causes of arthritis only need treatment for a short time. Other causes of arthritis may need lifelong treatment.

What is the outcome (prognosis)?

The outcome will depend on the cause of arthritis. Some forms of arthritis may go away (resolve) without any long-term problems. Other causes of arthritis may continue for many years and cause a great deal of disability.

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