

What Arthritis Treatments Are Right For You?

Arthritis is a general term for a group of more than 100 diseases. The word "arthritis" means "joint inflammation." Inflammation, which includes swelling, pain, and stiffness, is one of the body's natural reactions to disease or injury. If inflammation lasts for long periods or recurs, as in arthritis, it can lead to tissue damage. As many as 70 million Americans—or about one in three—have some form of arthritis or joint inflammation. It is a major cause of serious disability and lost work time for many people.

Different types of arthritis have various symptoms which range in severity from person to person. Symptoms of some types of arthritis may include fatigue, fever, and a rash along with the symptoms associated with inflammation.

Common Types of Arthritis

Osteoarthritis, the most common form, affects more than 20 million Americans. It occurs when the cartilage covering the end of the bones gradually wears away. Without the protection of the cartilage, the bones begin to rub against each other and the resulting friction leads to pain and swelling.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-lasting disease that can affect joints in any part of the body but most commonly the hands, wrists, and knees. With rheumatoid arthritis, the immune system—the body's defense system against disease—mistakenly causes the joint lining to swell.

Gout occurs when the body cannot eliminate a naturally occurring substance called uric acid. The excess uric acid forms needle-like crystals in the joints that cause swelling and severe pain.

Causes

The exact cause of most types of arthritis is not known, but there are several risk factors for arthritis.

- The risk of developing arthritis, especially osteoarthritis, increases with age.
- Women are at higher risk of developing arthritis than men.
- Obesity puts extra stress on weight-bearing joints, increasing wear and tear, and the risk of arthritis, especially osteoarthritis.
- Jobs that require repetitive movements or heavy lifting can stress the joints and/or cause an injury, which can lead to arthritis, particularly osteoarthritis.

How Is Arthritis Treated?

Most types of arthritis can be managed and the resulting pain and disability minimized through treatments such as exercise, heat/cold compresses, joint protection, surgery, and medication.

Medications

TOPICAL PAINKILLERS. Topical painkillers are available over the counter as creams, salves, or gels. They may be appropriate if your pain is mild, if only a few joints are affected by arthritis, or if oral medications don't completely control your pain.

ANTI-INFLAMMATORY PAIN RELIEVERS. Commonly called NSAIDs, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are medicines that reduce inflammation and relieve pain. These drugs are available both over the counter and with a prescription, and can be used to relieve the symptoms of arthritis.

NARCOTIC PAIN RELIEVERS. Narcotic pain relievers ease pain but don't relieve

joint inflammation. They are typically used in combination with Tylenol (acetaminophen) or an NSAID to enhance their effects. Possible negative consequences of narcotic use include the rare risk of developing a dependency on the treatment, and they can cause constipation, urinary problems, and sedation.

STEROIDS. Steroids are powerful anti-inflammatory drugs that can treat many forms of arthritis. Although effective, steroids have many side effects, especially when taken as a pill. Often, doctors try to avoid these problems by injecting the steroid into the affected joint or trying other medications in combination to keep the steroid dose as low as possible.

DISEASE-MODIFYING ANTIRHEUMATIC DRUGS (DMARDs). These drugs are often able to alter the course of some forms of inflammatory arthritis that can destroy the joints. DMARDs work by interfering with or suppressing the immune system that attacks the joints in people with certain forms of inflammatory arthritis. Although effective, DMARDs have a higher risk of serious side effects and it can often take weeks to notice its benefits.

BIOLOGIC THERAPY. Biologic response modifiers (biologics) work by changing the function of the immune system that attacks the joints. These drugs must be given by intravenous (by vein) infusion or by an injection, and they are more expensive than other arthritis drugs.

There are literally dozens of OTC and prescription medications to treat various forms of arthritis. Your community pharmacist can help you understand which treatments are best for your particular disease. □

Ask Your Family Pharmacist®