Arthritis - Nonspecific

Arthritis is inflammation of a joint. This usually means pain, redness, warmth or swelling are present. One or more joints may be involved. There are a number of types of arthritis. Your caregiver may not be able to tell what type of arthritis you have right away.

CAUSES

The most common cause of arthritis is the wear and tear on the joint (*osteoarthritis*). This causes damage to the cartilage, which can break down over time. The knees, hips, back, and neck are most often affected by this type of arthritis.

Other types of arthritis and common causes of joint pain include:

- Sprains and other injuries near the joint. Sometimes minor sprains and injuries cause pain and swelling that develop hours later.
- Rheumatoid arthritis. This affects hands, feet, and knees. It usually affects both sides of your body at the same time. It is often associated with chronic ailments, fever, weight loss, and general weakness.
- Crystal arthritis. Gout and pseudo gout can cause occasional acute severe pain, redness, and swelling in the foot, ankle, or knee.
- Infectious arthritis. Bacteria can get into a joint through a break in overlying skin. This can cause infection of the joint. Bacteria and viruses can also spread through the blood and affect your joints.
- Drug, infectious and allergy reactions. Sometimes joints can become mildly painful and slightly swollen with these types of illnesses.

SYMPTOMS

- Pain is the main symptom.
- Your joint or joints can also be red, swollen and warm or hot to the touch.
- You may have a fever with certain types of arthritis, or even feel overall ill.
- The joint with arthritis will hurt with movement. Stiffness is present with some types of arthritis.

DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver will suspect arthritis based on your description of your symptoms and on your exam. Testing may be needed to find the type of arthritis:

- Blood and sometimes urine tests.
- X-ray tests and sometimes CT or MRI scans.
- Removal of fluid from the joint (*arthrocentesis*) is done to check for bacteria, crystals, or other causes. Your caregiver (or a specialist) will numb the area over the joint with a local anaesthetic, and use a needle to remove joint fluid for examination. This procedure is only minimally uncomfortable.
- Even with these tests, your caregiver may not be able to tell what kind of arthritis you have. Consultation with a specialist (*rheumatologist*) may be helpful.

TREATMENT

Your caregiver will discuss with you treatment specific to your type of arthritis. If the specific type cannot be determined, then the following general recommendations may apply.

Treatment of severe joint pain includes:

- Rest.
- Elevation.
- Anti-inflammatory medication (for example, ibuprofen) may be prescribed. Avoiding activities that cause increased pain.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain and discomfort as recommended by your

caregiver.

- Cold packs over an inflamed joint may be used for 10-15 minutes every hour. Hot packs sometimes feel better, but do not use overnight. Do not use hot packs if you are diabetic without your caregiver's permission.
- A cortisone shot into arthritic joints may help reduce pain and swelling.
- Any acute arthritis that gets worse over the next 1-2 days needs to be looked at to be sure there is no joint infection.

Long-term arthritis treatment involves modifying activities and lifestyle to reduce joint stress jarring. This can include weight loss.

- Regular exercise is helpful, including low-impact activities such as:
  - Swimming.
  - Biking.
  - Water aerobics.
  - Walking.

Exercise is needed to nourish the joint cartilage and remove waste. This helps keep the muscles around the joint strong.

- Morning stiffness is often relieved by a warm shower.
- Putting your joints through regular range-of-motion is also helpful.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Do not** take aspirin to relieve pain if gout is suspected. This elevates uric acid levels.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Rest the joint as much as possible.
- If your joint is swollen, keep it elevated.
- Use crutches if the painful joint is in your leg.
- Drinking plenty of fluids may help for certain types of arthritis.
- Follow your caregiver's dietary instructions.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You do not feel better in 24 hours or are getting worse.
- You have side effects to medications, or are not getting better with treatment.
- You have an oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C).

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- An oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops, or as your caregiver suggests.
- You develop fever or severe joint pain, swelling or redness.
- Many joints are involved and become painful and swollen.
- There is severe back pain and/or leg weakness.
- You have loss of bowel or bladder control.

Document Released: 03/16/2010 Document Re-Released: 03/14/2011
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