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2514 Stenson Dr | Cedar Park TX 78613 | 512-336-1005 | Fax 512-336-1008 | missy@CHAseminars.com

Resident Characteristics & Assessments
Arthritis

Understanding Arthritis

More than 66 million Americans suffer from some form of arthritis, and many don't even know why they're experiencing pain. So what exactly is arthritis? Arthritis is a disease characterized by pain, swelling or stiffness in the joints. There are more than 100 types of this disease, which is one of the oldest and most chronic in the world. To understand how arthritis works, let's take a look at the musculoskeletal system. The musculoskeletal system is made up of 650 muscles and 206 bones which support the body. The places where bones meet and movement takes place are called joints. Arthritis arises when, for various reasons, the joints stop working properly. The different types of arthritis are classified by the way in which the joint fails to function. Two of the most common joint failures result in rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis occurs when the cartilage that protects bones begins to wear away. The raw area that results causes bone to rub painfully on bone. Rheumatoid arthritis, on the other hand, happens when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own tissue, resulting in joint inflammation. Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disease, which means it is characterized by long periods where a sufferer feels fine, interspersed with painful flare-ups. This type of arthritis can occur at any age. In contrast, osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease, which means it becomes steadily worse over time. People who are overweight put extra pressure on their hips, knees and other weight-bearing joints. This can contribute to the wearing away of vital joint cartilage. Other causes of osteoarthritis include sports-related injuries and physical trauma, like car accidents. Occupations that depend on heavy physical labor are another common culprit. Osteoarthritis is more common in older women due to a shortage estrogen. No matter the classification, arthritis usually causes pain, swelling or stiffness in the joints. People who have rheumatoid arthritis may also feel generally ill and experience flu-like symptoms such as fatigue, fever and lack of appetite. Usually, the pain of rheumatoid arthritis is symmetrical, meaning that joints are inflamed on both sides of the body. Osteoarthritis, on the other hand, usually occurs on only one side of the body. For example, a sufferer may experience pain in their right hip, but not their left. Although there is currently no cure for arthritis, a number of options can help ease painful symptoms.

Easing Arthritis Pain

The pain suffered by those with arthritis can be debilitating. Let’s look at some non-invasive methods for treating arthritis pain. There is no cure for the chronic pain that is characteristic of arthritis, but there is good news for the 30 percent of Americans who suffer from the disease. There are a number of treatments available that can help to minimize joint discomfort immediately. A simple way to relieve chronic arthritis pain is with over-the-counter-medications. Some commonly available OTCs for pain include aspirin, Advil, Tylenol and Aleve. Because Ibuprofen, the active ingredient in Advil, combines pain-relief with anti-inflammatory action, it may be the preferred choice for arthritis pain. Your best bet is liquid gel capsules, which absorb more readily into the blood stream. Another great way to soothe aching joints is to apply a liniment like Tiger Balm or Bengay to painful areas. If you can, have someone else apply the cream for you as a gentle rubdown can be soothing as well. Many people who suffer from arthritis pain find that a heat and ice treatment works wonders. To try this therapy at home, begin by applying ice to new pain or a recent injury. Get the maximum benefit from ice by applying it to painful areas two or three times a day for fifteen minutes at a time. Repeat this treatment for twenty-four hours, always removing ice after fifteen minutes, as it reaches maximum efficacy at that point. Unlike ice, warmth can continue to provide benefit over time. After twenty-four hours of ice treatments, apply moist heat to an injury, either in the shower or with a heating pad, for up to thirty minutes. After forty-eight hours, begin using heat and ice in sequence. As a general rule, apply heat in the morning and before physical activity. Switch to ice in the evening and after exercise. A great, natural way to dull arthritis pain is by focusing on breathing in a slow, controlled rhythm. Start by inhaling deeply through your nose, holding your breath for three counts. Exhale fully by contracting

your stomach. Continue breathing this way for at least three minutes. It may seem simple, but proper breathing can provide fast, effective pain relief. That's because controlled breath shifts the mind's attention away from pain and the body's response to it. You can increase the benefit of your breathing exercises by engaging in visual imagery. Try imagining your breath as a wave of healing light. Envision the light flowing into your head and down your spine, and then outward to the rest of your body. This technique will calm you and help you focus on healing. Although there is currently no cure for arthritis, these tips can make a world of difference in the chronic pain caused by the disease.

PREVENTING ARTHRITIS PAIN

Osteoarthritis affects 25 million Americans, but there's good news for people suffering from the condition. A few lifestyle changes can help people with arthritis live with significantly less pain. For people with osteoarthritis, chronic pain can be a part of everyday life. While there is no cure for osteoarthritis, there are treatments that can help. In my book, Arthritis RX, I discuss a set of guidelines which can reduce arthritis pain by up to 43 percent based on our clinical trials. There are three elements to the program. The first component is a basic exercise regimen that strengthens the body's core muscles. The second part recommends daily nutritional supplements to ease inflammation. Finally, the plan illustrates the basics of an anti-inflammatory diet. A host of powerful nutrients have been proven to combat the inflammation that can lead to arthritis pain. You can get the benefit of these nutrients by supplementing your diet with a mixture of glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate and ginger. For the best results, take 1,500 milligrams of glucosamine, 1,200 milligrams of chondroitin sulfate and 510 milligrams of ginger a day. Each of these supplements is available at your local vitamin store. Another way to cut back on inflammation is to make some selective dietary changes. By eating foods that discourage the body from becoming inflamed, you can help reduce discomfort. The typical American diet is very high in processed sugars, salt and saturated fats. Food choices like this can lead to obesity and may result in serious inflammation. Starting an anti-inflammatory diet doesn't have to mean giving up delicious foods. Cold-water fish like salmon and tuna, fresh fruits, whole grains and dark, leafy vegetables are all tasty choices. For best results, avoid saturated omega-6 fatty acids, which are in red meat, and fast food. These foods may taste good now, but they really aren't worth the arthritis pain later. A 15-minute set of Pilates and yoga exercises can also be extremely beneficial for people with arthritis. These gentle movements should be completed three times a week both help relieve existing discomfort, and to prevent new pain from developing. Let's look at an example of a yoga movement you can try at home. This is a warm-up stretch called Sun Salutation Lying Down. Lie flat on your back, with legs straight and arms at your sides, and look up at the ceiling. Inhale as you sweep your arms out to point above your head. As you exhale, sweep your arms back down. Even though osteoarthritis is currently without a cure, every person living with the condition can make the choice to engage in positive life changes like these, which will alleviate pain and discourage it from returning. And remember never begin an exercise, diet or nutritional supplement program without first talking to a health care professional.

DIAGNOSING ARTHRITIS

One in seven Americans will be diagnosed with some form of arthritis during their lifetime. How is this diagnosis made? A diagnosis of arthritis usually occurs following a thorough medical history, physical examination and possibly an imaging procedure, like an X-ray. If you're experiencing symptoms of arthritis-like pain, swelling or stiffness in your joints, make an appointment with your doctor. When you arrive for your appointment, your doctor will begin by taking a detailed medical history. Come prepared to answer questions about illnesses in your family, medications you're currently taking, and the duration, intensity and location of your pain. Next, your doctor will complete a detailed physical examination of your affected joints, looking for swelling, redness, warmth, tender points and skin rashes. Following the examination, your doctor may order X-rays to confirm a diagnosis of arthritis and provide clues as to which type of the disease you may have. The most common form of arthritis, osteoarthritis, has distinct signs, including a narrowing of the joint, bony spurs at the joint's margin, and a one-sided distribution of joint irregularities. A hereditary form of arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, exhibits different X-ray signs. A person with this type of arthritis may experience a loss of bone

calcium or joint irregularities on both sides of the body. Some doctors may bypass X-rays in favor of magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI. This procedure involves using a large magnet and radio waves to produce a clear picture of the body's interior. An MRI is painless and usually lasts about an hour. In addition to these imaging techniques, blood tests can be helpful in diagnosing certain kinds of arthritis. For example, the majority of people with rheumatoid arthritis will have rheumatoid factor antibodies, or RF antibodies in their blood. Your rheumatologist may choose to determine the type of arthritis you have with a joint aspiration procedure if necessary. During a joint aspiration, a needle is inserted into the joint to withdraw a small amount of synovial, or joint, fluid. The synovial fluid in an osteoarthritis joint is usually clear, while a rheumatoid arthritis joint's fluid will be cloudy. There is currently no cure for arthritis, so if you are diagnosed with it, your doctor will discuss various options for easing your pain and managing the disease. If you are experiencing pain, swelling or stiffness in any of your joints, make an appointment to see your physician. Doing so is the first step on the road to better health.

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Vijay Vad, MD

Hospital for Special Surgery; Official PGA & Pro-Tennis Tour Doctor

Vijay B. Vad, MD joined the staff of Hospital for Special Surgery in September 1997. Dr. Vad is the former physician for the professional men's golf and tennis circuit and specializes in minimally invasive treatments of sports injuries, spine and arthritis. He is also the author of the books Back Rx, Arthritis Rx and Golf Rx published by Penguin Books.