

OSTEOARTHRITIS: OVERVIEW

by: DR. TREVOR L. HALL, MD, CCFP, DIP. SPORT MED

Does your hip ache after a round of golf? Does your knee swell after your weekend hockey tournament? Have you had to cut down on your weekly running mileage due to painful joints? There are many causes of joint pain, but osteoarthritis (OA) is one of the more common reasons for active individuals to seek medical advice. Over 10 million Canadians suffer from osteoarthritis. Having OA does not necessarily mean that you have to stop your favourite sport or activity since there are various treatment options available that can decrease your OA symptoms and improve your quality of life.

Osteoarthritis is the “wear and tear” type of arthritis that involves degeneration of the cartilage that normally surrounds and protects the bone surfaces in the affected joint. For example, cartilage is the white gristle that you see at the end of a chicken leg bone. The process of OA involves the roughening and thinning of this normally smooth protective surface. There are other changes within the osteoarthritic joint such as thinning of the joint (“synovial”) fluid and occasionally inflammatory changes. This type of arthritis is very different from other conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis which is very inflammatory in nature.

The pain of OA is often described as an “achiness” or “stiffness”. However, OA pain may also be sharp in nature, especially with sudden twisting movements. This pain may start gradually or more suddenly after the joint surface has been irritated by injury. OA must be differentiated from other conditions and sports injuries (e.g., tendonitis and meniscal cartilage tears) since the treatment can be quite different.

The diagnosis of osteoarthritis is usually made by your physician by listening to the type of symptoms you are having, examining your affected joints, and by confirming the arthritic changes by sending you for an X-ray. Occasionally, more specialized tests such as an MRI or bone scan may be necessary. Also, laboratory blood tests are sometimes required to rule out other types of inflammatory arthritis (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis).

For most osteoarthritic joints, there are many treatment options available, such as:

- Lifestyle changes (e.g., weight loss, activity modification)
- Exercise and strengthening
- Physiotherapy and athletic therapy
- Other therapies (e.g., massage therapy, acupuncture)
- Medications and supplements

- Braces and orthotic devices
- Injections and “viscosupplementation”
- Surgery

A proper treatment plan should be tailored to the individual and to his or her lifestyle and exercise program. Not every treatment option is suitable for each person. For example, certain supplements are only helpful for mild OA and certain braces only work for OA in a particular location in the knee.

So don't let osteoarthritis stop you from staying active. A well-formulated approach to managing your osteoarthritis is essential to keeping you active. Make your joints happy with good OA treatment!

Dr. Trevor L. Hall, MD, CCFP, Dip. Sport Med., is a sports medicine physician, certified by the Canadian



Academy of Sport Medicine and fellowship-trained at the University of Toronto. He is an assistant clinical professor at the McMaster University Medical School and a guest lecturer at the University of Waterloo. He has worked internationally with Canadian national teams and currently is sports medicine consultant for WLU Football Team.