

Easing Arthritis Woes
By Dr. Daniel A. Shaye

Q: I've got aches and pains, and I've got a strong feeling it's arthritis. I like to hike, play recreational sports, and keep up with my kids. Short of popping pills all the time, what can I do?

A: By age 50, most of us have at least some degree of arthritis in the knee, hip, spine, feet, or hands; and many of us start feeling the ravages of time far earlier. According to The Arthritis Foundation, arthritis is America's top cause of disability. Though prevention is better than cure, short of a time machine there are some simple things you can do to care for yourself.

First, you're wise to be concerned about eating pills as if they were Pez candy. One study suggested that chronic use of acetaminophen (commonly sold as Tylenol) may be responsible for 8-10% of all end-stage kidney failure in the U.S. Other studies have linked anti-inflammatories (NSAIDS) to increased risk of heart attack and stroke, including 27,000 people who died as a direct result of FDA-approved Vioxx. Newer drugs and old standards like aspirin have their own risks.

Have you considered getting a diagnosis? Though most arthritis is of the wear-and-tear variety known as osteoarthritis, your doctor can rule out more rare forms of systemic arthritis such as rheumatoid. Treatment should be paired to a diagnosis. Think of it this way: rotating your tires is great for your car, but it won't fix a brake problem. A joint specialist such as a rheumatologist (typically an M.D. or D.O.) or a chiropractic doctor (D.C.) is a good choice for a proper diagnosis.

Let's presume you've joined the roughly 50 million Americans who have mild, moderate, or even severe arthritis; and let's further presume that it's the wear-and-tear variety. What to do? Grit your teeth and bear it? Hardly. Some key tips:

- ✓ First, be sure you're well hydrated. Joint cartilage, including menisci in the knee, hyaline cartilage around the ends of bones, and the discs between spinal bones, is mostly water. It's possible to drink too much water, but most people are chronically dehydrated -- and that can affect joint health. Avoid diuretics such as alcohol; or if you must indulge, do so in moderation, with a "chaser" in the form of an extra glass of water.
- ✓ Exercise. There are two highly effective ways to wear out a joint: overdo it, or underdo it. If you're a couch potato, consider an exercise program. Even gentle walking will help you manage your weight, which (unless you live in the lake) takes a load off the joints. Strong muscles support joints, relieving stress and shock. Another bonus: motion pumps nutrition into joint cartilage, and wipes the slick substance known as "synovial fluid" around joint surfaces. The tin man has his oil can; we have exercise.

- ✓ Consider supplementation. The negative side effects of glucosamine and chondroitin are limited, and many people report some symptomatic relief with the use of one or both of these substances. Talk to a doctor who is familiar with nutritional supplements before launching into a regimen.
- ✓ Move functionally. Even if your exercise is lifting the grandchild, learn to do it safely. In the gym, spend some time with a trainer. At work, be sure you use safety equipment and proper procedures such as team lifting for heavy loads. At home and in life, lift objects or squirming little people using your core musculature, bending your knees and keeping the "load" close to your center of gravity. A therapist or chiropractor can teach you how to lift safely, and many disciplines (yoga, martial arts, dance) teach functional movement principles.
- ✓ Stick it. Acupuncture may be effective to help control arthritis-related inflammation and pain. It's safe and effective when done by a trained practitioner.
- ✓ See a chiropractor. "Stuck" joints are prone to arthritis and pain. If you're skeptical, try a long car trip. You'll soon be achy and stiff. It's not uncommon that joints "fixate," requiring more than stretching or exercise to get them to glide. Every United States Olympic team has a team chiropractor to keep athletes functioning well and their joints gliding. Though most people see a chiropractor for pain, many people see a chiropractor for a "tune-up" similar to a tire rotation, oil change, and lube. Medicare helps out by either paying for the treatment, or by legally limiting the fees a chiropractor can charge senior citizens.

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