

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a degenerative condition which affects our joints. It is caused by the breakdown of cartilage within the joints and results in swelling, pain, loss of range of movement and stiffness.

Cartilage is a rubbery like tissue which lines our joints and acts as a natural shock absorber or cushion in the joint. It is a smooth and slippery tissue which allows our bones to move nicely on each other. Cartilage has very poor blood supply so when it is injured it is very slow to heal and may not heal at all. With age and general wear and tear we lose this cartilage in our joints which results in the development of OA.

Without this nice smooth surface to move on joints become painful and stiff to move. The body then lays down more bone in the area to compensate but all this does is make the joint larger and harder to move. On x-ray arthritic joints are often larger than a normal joint, the bony ends have lipping, osteophytes and the joint is narrower. The main symptoms of OA include; pain, swelling, heat, stiffness and reduced mobility.

OA generally affects our larger weight bearing joints like our hips, knees and back. Any area of our body which we have used excessively, or placed a great deal of load on are also susceptible. For example; builders shoulders, physio's hands and typists thumbs and wrists.

So what are the causes of OA? Generally it is from the body's natural wear and tear in the joint. Like the fact our car tyres don't last forever, unfortunately neither do our joints! If you have had a cartilage injury or a serious injury to a joint then it is more than likely to develop OA later in your life time. There is thought to be a genetic component to OA and there is a familial history but unlike rheumatoid arthritis it is not necessarily passed down the generations, and our environment and work have a strong influence on it developing. Obesity has a large impact on our joints, and places them at risk of developing OA. Being overweight and making our joints carry this extra weight around daily, places stress on the joints and compresses them, therefore wearing away the cartilage cushion.

We can try and prevent OA or at least lessen the severity of it in a number of ways. Taking a supplement like omega 3 fish oils helps to naturally lubricate the joints. Like how we put oil in the car, our bodies need this essential oil too.

Glucosamine and chondroitin are often taken to help with arthritis. These have been shown to stop the degeneration of cartilage in our joints, they cannot regenerate the lost cartilage but will limit the amount of further degeneration. Glucosamine is not a pain

killer, and some people find it has no effect on their pain, but as the pill works at a cellular level, you may not see any visible changes. Glucosamine has to be taken for at least 6 months before any change would be evident, so its not a quick fix, but it wont do you any harm to take, and may actually do some good! It will work best on our weight bearing joints like ankles, hips, knees and backs as these have the most cartilage in them.

Maintaining a healthy weight will assist with protecting the joints and limiting the compressive forces going through our joints will also help. Ensure you have good support shock absorbing shoes for walking and running, and walk or run on the grass or beach which is softer than the concrete. Water exercise is great as it places no stress on the body, but maintains strength and range in the joint.

So how can physio help with OA? When you have an acute flare up of OA your joint will feel hot, swollen and very painful. Physiotherapy can help to settle this down with acupuncture, massage, compression and can direct you to the correct exercises to be doing.

Once the flare up has eased the most important thing to do is maintain the range of movement in the joint, and the strength. Your physiotherapist can write you a program for these for you to continue with. The old adage 'if you don't use it, you lose it' applies to OA joints. If you don't stretch and strengthen them they will be worse.

When a joint is injured in a fall or a knock, if there is OA present, it will take a lot longer than a healthy joint to heal. You may be mistakenly told ' its just arthritis, you will have to learn to live with it' but this not 100% true. The OA will have been present in the joint for some time, with maybe little to no pain, so it is in fact the trauma that has caused the pain and possibly damaged the soft tissue around the joint. This will take longer to settle down with therapy but don't think you have to live with the pain forever!

Please contact Mangawhai Physiotherapy on 4314476 if you would like to discuss a problem or for any advice.