Arthritis

Arthritis. Chances are over half of the people reading this article have been diagnosed with some degree of arthritis. Those who have escaped this commonplace disease most likely know someone who suffers from arthritis. Arthritis has become an American epidemic. The Arthritis Foundation states that one in every three adults suffers from arthritis. In fact, according to the CDC (national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), arthritis is the leading cause of disability in people 15 years of age and older.

This article is the first in a two-part series. In this article we will define arthritis, the anatomy of a joint, and the specifics of Osteoarthritis (OA), the most prevalent form of arthritis.

Arthritis literally means *joint inflammation*. There are over 100 types of arthritis. The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis (OA), defined as a degenerative disease of the cartilage and bone that results in pain and stiffness in the affected joint.

So what is a "joint" anyway? A joint is an area of the body where two or more bones are joined together by muscles, tendons, ligaments and cartilage. Let's keep it simple...

1. **Tendons** attach muscles to the bones.
2. **Muscles** create movement in the joint and help to stabilize the joint.
3. **Smooth thin cartilage** encases the bones in the joint (helping to promote friction-free movement).
4. **Thicker pads of cartilage** help to absorb shock.
5. **Ligaments** are tough bands of fibrous tissue that bind the joint together, giving the joint much of its stability.
6. The **joint capsule** acts much like a glove surrounding the entire joint.
7. The **synovial lining** of the joint capsule secretes tiny amounts of fluid that lubricate the joint.

Though **osteoarthritis** (OA) is a minor annoyance for some people; for others, the condition can be a painful, discouraging and disabling condition.

OA is characterized by pain, stiffness, limited range of motion and mechanical irregularities in the affected joint. In a healthy joint, the smooth/wet cartilage enables the bones to move against each other with very little friction. This healthy cartilage absorbs nutrients and fluids like a sponge absorbs water. However, a joint affected with OA does not receive these nutrients and fluid. Eventually this dry cartilage cracks and becomes rough, often eroding the joint and creating inflammation (swelling) and subsequent pain. These affected joints may create bony enlargements as well (often seen in arthritic joints of the hand).

The most common joints that are affected by OA are: hand, shoulder, neck, lower back, hip and knee.

Nearly 50% of those with arthritis mistakenly believe that there is nothing that can be done to treat this disease. They continue living their life with this painful, discouraging and debilitating condition. Fortunately, something CAN be done about arthritis...PHYSICAL THERAPY! Though OA is a chronic condition and there is no cure for arthritis, physical therapy can help to make living with arthritis easier and less painful.

In our next issue, we will address how physical therapy can help patients diagnosed with OA.

with a healthcare provider. Decisions regarding patient care must be made with a healthcare provider, considering the unique characteristics of the patient.

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