



MUSCULOSKELETAL HEALTH NEWS

Don't Let Osteoarthritis Steal Your Life.

– Willis W. Stevenson III, MD

Most of us will develop osteoarthritis at some point in our lives, particularly as we age. Fortunately for many, it will

be a mild annoyance – perhaps a little joint discomfort, quickly remedied with a couple of aspirin. But for others osteoarthritis can be agonizing and debilitating, radically impacting one's ability to enjoy life.

“Think of osteoarthritis as a wear-and-tear disease,” says Willis W. Stevenson III, MD, an orthopedic surgeon at OSMC. “As we grow older the cartilage that helps bones of the joint to glide over one another naturally wears away. As the condition worsens, the bones can actually grind against each other, creating potentially debilitating pain. We don't know the exact cause of the disease, and we've yet to find a way to prevent it. But we do know what contributes to it and that has led to a wide range of effective treatment options.”

Included in the contributing factors Stevenson cites are age and genetics – factors we can't do much about. “As we grow older, our joints pay the price for the years we've spent on them,” he remarks. “Wear and tear just naturally happens. And if there's a family history of arthritis – again something we can't control – there's a good chance that we could end up like our ancestors.”

But unlike age and genetics, other contributing factors *are* under our control. “Excess weight is a big reason many people develop arthritis. For every pound we gain, we add four pounds of stress to the knee joints. So if a person is 20 pounds overweight, that's an extra 80 pounds on the joints. And exercise is a big factor as well. Exercise keeps muscles stronger and stronger muscles help protect the joints.”

Each treatment option available at OSMC is designed to mirror the severity of the condition. But even before a patient seeks help from the physician, there are home remedies that may prove quite effective in easing the discomfort. A healthier diet helps many people facing early-stage arthritis. There are numerous over-the-counter remedies to try: ibuprofen, naprosyn, and every-day aspirin. And low-impact exercises – bicycling, walking, swimming – will strengthen the muscles and help relieve joint stress. “Patients frequently ask me if they should avoid walking in order to alleviate pain. I point out that if you stop exercising to avoid

pain, you're likely to put on more weight. The more weight, the more stress. The more stress, the more pain. My goal is to keep them walking. Sometimes the remedy is as simple as orthotics, inserts that can slip into the shoe to help redistribute the weight and pressure on the joint.”

As the disease progresses and home treatment no longer gets the job done, it's time to see a doctor who can bring stronger medications to the table

including anti-inflammatories, analgesics, steroids, or opiates. Cortisone injections are frequently used to reduce inflammation, and for some patients viscosupplement injections provide improved short-term lubrication of the joints. “As we age the natural fluid that helps cushion the joint becomes thinner. Viscosupplements actually trigger the fluid-producing cells to generate fresh, thicker fluid.”

Arthritis treatment options in the orthopedic toolbox include a lot more than just drug therapy. A variety of mechanical aids and other therapies are available including braces, canes, and walkers, and OSMC offers a comprehensive and fully staffed physical therapy unit that works with many patients to help them maintain their mobility and independence.

