

### **What is Osteoarthritis?**

Osteoarthritis (OA) is also known as "degenerative joint disease". It is thought to be mainly a problem of "wear and tear" and hence affects the elderly more than the young. When it occurs in the younger age groups, it is usually associated with injury or previous damage to the joint. Certain occupations may also make a person more prone to osteoarthritis in certain joints. There is new evidence that osteoarthritis occurs also as a result of abnormal cartilage metabolism.

### **Types of Osteoarthritis**

Almost any joint can be involved in osteoarthritis. However the pattern of joint involvement, X-ray changes and the absence of certain features on blood tests can help to distinguish it from other forms of arthritis.

The small joints of the hands are commonly involved in "generalized osteoarthritis". This form of OA tends to occur in females, can run in families and there is no underlying cause. OA of the hands rarely causes severe symptoms and the function of the hand remains good for many years. The spine is also commonly involved in OA. When this is severe, the surrounding nerve roots may be pinched and cause tingling, numbness or weakness. Other names for spinal OA are "cervical spondylosis" when the neck is involved and "lumbar spondylosis" when the lower back is involved.

Large joints can also be affected, especially the hip and the knee. Other joints include the ankle, the shoulder and the elbow. When only one joint is involved, it is likely to be "secondary OA" where there is an underlying cause such as previous trauma.

### **What are the Symptoms?**

Joint pains tend to occur after prolonged use. As such, symptoms are usually worse towards the evening. This is in contrast to inflammatory forms of arthritis where symptoms are generally worse in the early morning.

There may also be periods where the joint can become red, warm and swollen. Arthritis due to deposition of crystals in the joint can mimic osteoarthritis.

### **Treatment**

#### ***Weight Control***

Weight control is especially important for the large weight bearing joints such as the hip and the knee. There is no need for specific dietary adjustments except for a weight reducing diet in those who are overweight.

#### ***Physiotherapy and Exercise***

Physiotherapy is important to maintain strength in the surrounding muscles. The affected joint will then be subjected to less stress and strain. Walking aids are also prescribed for this purpose. In general, swimming is an exercise that is beneficial to almost any form of arthritis. Some sports which place severe demands on the joints may not be suitable but the patient should aim to keep as fit as possible. This includes stopping cigarette smoking.

#### ***Appropriate Footwear***

Shoes should be comfortable and of a good fit. They should provide good support and even

weight distribution. High heels are generally not helpful. Sports shoes usually fulfil most requirements of a good shoe.

### ***Medications***

Many medications are prescribed for control of symptoms only. Simple painkillers can be very helpful unless the joint is inflamed. When this happens, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or injection of steroids into the joint can provide relief. At present, research is still going on to see if any treatment can stop the disease from progressing. Some natural supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin may be helpful in certain patients. Some patients may respond to injections of a lubricant substance called Synvisc into joints.

### ***Joint Replacement***

In advanced stages, replacement of a severely damaged joint can produce very good results especially for the hip.

### **Conclusion**

Osteoarthritis is a common condition. Much can be done for patients to enable them to live as normal a life as possible.