INTRODUCTION
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William Shiel Jr., M.D., F.A.C.P.
Chief Medical Editor, MedicineNet.com

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Arthritis facts

- Arthritis is inflammation of one or more joints.
- Symptoms of arthritis include pain and limited function of joints.
- Arthritis sufferers include men and women, children and adults.
- A rheumatologist is a medical arthritis expert.
- Earlier and accurate diagnosis can help to prevent irreversible damage and disability.

What is arthritis and what causes it?

Arthritis is a joint disorder featuring inflammation. A joint is an area of the body where two different bones meet. A joint functions to move the body parts connected by its bones. Arthritis literally means inflammation of one or more joints.

Arthritis is frequently accompanied by joint pain. Joint pain is referred to as arthralgia.

There are many types of arthritis (over 100 identified, and the number is growing). The types range from those related to wear and tear of cartilage (such as osteoarthritis) to those associated with inflammation resulting from an overactive immune system (such as rheumatoid arthritis). Together, the many types of arthritis make up the most common chronic illness in the United States.

The causes of arthritis depend on the form of arthritis. Causes include injury (leading to osteoarthritis), metabolic abnormalities (such as gout and pseudogout), hereditary factors, the direct and indirect effect of infections (bacterial and viral), and a misdirected immune system with autoimmunity (such as in rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus).

Arthritis is classified as one of the rheumatic diseases. These are conditions that are different individual illnesses, with differing features, treatments, complications, and prognoses. They are similar in that they have a tendency to affect the joints, muscles, ligaments, cartilage, and tendons, and many have the potential to affect other internal body areas.

What are arthritis signs and symptoms?

Symptoms of arthritis include pain and limited function of joints. Inflammation of the joints from arthritis is characterized by joint stiffness, swelling, redness, and warmth. Tenderness of the inflamed joint can be present.

Many of the forms of arthritis, because they are rheumatic diseases, can cause symptoms affecting various organs of the body that do not directly involve the joints. Therefore, symptoms in some patients with certain forms of arthritis can also include fever, gland swelling (swollen lymph nodes), weight loss, fatigue, feeling unwell, and even symptoms from abnormalities of organs such as the lungs, heart, or kidneys.
Who is affected by arthritis?

Arthritis sufferers include men and women, children and adults. Approximately 350 million people worldwide have arthritis. Nearly 40 million people in the United States are affected by arthritis, including over 250,000 children! More than 27 million Americans have osteoarthritis. Approximately 1.3 million Americans suffer from rheumatoid arthritis. More than half of those with arthritis are under 65 years of age. Nearly 60% of Americans with arthritis are women.

Can arthritis be prevented?

Since most forms of arthritis are inherited to some degree, there is no real way to prevent them. Arthritis that follows joint injury could be prevented by adhering to safety regulations and trying to avoid becoming injured. Arthritis related to infection (for examples, septic arthritis, reactive arthritis, Whipple's disease) could be prevented by not becoming infected with the causative organism. The extent to which this is possible varies depending upon the individual condition.

Read full article:
http://www.onhealth.com/arthritis/article.htm

Common forms of arthritis

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a form of arthritis that features the breakdown and eventual loss of the cartilage of one or more joints. Cartilage is a protein substance that serves as a "cushion" between the bones of the joints. Among the over 100 different types of arthritis conditions, osteoarthritis is the most common, affecting over 25 million people in the United States. Osteoarthritis occurs more frequently as we age. Before age 45, osteoarthritis occurs more frequently in males. After 55 years of age, it occurs more frequently in females. In the United States, all races appear equally affected. A higher incidence of osteoarthritis exists in the Japanese population, while South-African blacks, East Indians, and Southern Chinese have lower rates. Osteoarthritis is abbreviated as OA or referred to as degenerative arthritis or degenerative joint disease (DJD).

Osteoarthritis commonly affects the hands, feet, spine, and large weight-bearing joints, such as the hips and knees. Osteoarthritis usually has no known cause and is referred to as primary osteoarthritis. When the cause of the osteoarthritis is known, the condition is referred to as secondary osteoarthritis.

Read full article:
http://www.onhealth.com/osteoarthritis/article.htm
**Rheumatoid Arthritis**

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that causes chronic inflammation of the joints. While inflammation of the tissue around the joints and inflammatory arthritis are characteristic features of rheumatoid arthritis, the disease can also cause inflammation and injury in other organs in the body. Because it can affect multiple other organs of the body, rheumatoid arthritis is referred to as a systemic illness and is sometimes called rheumatoid disease.

While rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic illness, meaning it can last for years, patients may experience long periods without symptoms. However, rheumatoid arthritis is typically a progressive illness that has the potential to cause joint destruction and functional disability.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a common rheumatic disease, affecting approximately 1.3 million people in the United States, according to current census data. The disease is three times more common in women as in men. It affects people of all races equally. The disease can begin at any age and even affects children (juvenile rheumatoid arthritis), but it most often starts after 40 years of age and before 60 years of age. In some families, multiple members can be affected, suggesting a genetic basis for the disorder.

Read full article:
http://www.medicinenet.com/rheumatoid_arthritis/article.htm

**Fibromyalgia (Fibrositis)**

**What is fibromyalgia?**

Fibromyalgia is a chronic pain condition that affects 4% of the population of the United States. Fibromyalgia commonly affects the muscles and ligaments and usually has been present for years when a physician diagnoses the condition. Fibromyalgia was formerly known as fibrositis.

**What causes fibromyalgia?**

Fibromyalgia has been shown to be genetic. It frequently becomes evident after stressful events. The stressful events may be emotional (such as a traumatic life event), physical (such as a motor-vehicle accident), or medical (such as certain infections). The chronic pain of rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus, and other autoimmune diseases can trigger the development of fibromyalgia.

Read full article:
http://www.medicinenet.com/fibromyalgia_facts/article.htm
**Gout (Gouty Arthritis)**

Gout is a disease that results from an overload of uric acid in the body. This overload of uric acid leads to the formation of tiny crystals of urate that deposit in tissues of the body, especially the joints. When crystals form in the joints, it causes recurring attacks of joint inflammation (arthritis). Chronic gout can also lead to deposits of hard lumps of uric acid in the tissues, particularly in and around the joints and may cause joint destruction, decreased kidney function, and kidney stones (nephrolithiasis).

Gout has the unique distinction of being one of the most frequently recorded medical illnesses throughout history. It is often related to an inherited abnormality in the body’s ability to process uric acid. Uric acid is a breakdown product of purines that are part of many foods we eat. An abnormality in handling uric acid can cause attacks of painful arthritis (gout attack), kidney stones, and blockage of the kidney-filtering tubules with uric acid crystals, leading to kidney failure.

Read full article:
http://www.medicinenet.com/gout_gouty_arthritis/article.htm

**Psoriatic Arthritis**

Psoriatic arthritis is a chronic disease characterized by a form of inflammation of the skin (psoriasis) and joints (inflammatory arthritis). Psoriasis is a common skin condition affecting 2% of the Caucasian population in the United States. It features patchy, raised, red areas of skin inflammation with scaling. Psoriasis often affects the tips of the elbows and knees, the scalp and ears, the navel, and around the genital areas or anus. Approximately 10%-15% of patients who have psoriasis also develop an associated inflammation of their joints.

The onset of psoriatic arthritis generally occurs in the fourth and fifth decades of life. Males and females are affected equally. The skin disease (psoriasis) and the joint disease (arthritis) often appear separately. In fact, the skin disease precedes the arthritis in nearly 80% of patients. However, the arthritis may precede the psoriasis in up to 15% of patients. In some patients, the diagnosis of psoriatic arthritis can be difficult if the arthritis precedes psoriasis by many years. In fact, some patients have had arthritis for over 20 years before psoriasis eventually appears! Conversely, patients can have psoriasis for over 20 years prior to the development of arthritis, leading to the ultimate diagnosis of psoriatic arthritis.

Read full article:
http://www.medicinenet.com/psoriatic_arthritis/article.htm
**Septic Arthritis (Infectious Arthritis)**

Septic, or infectious, arthritis is infection of one or more joints by microorganisms. Normally, the joint is lubricated with a small amount of fluid that is referred to as synovial fluid or joint fluid. The normal joint fluid is sterile and, if removed and cultured in the laboratory, no microbes will be detected. With septic arthritis, microbes are identifiable in an affected joint fluid.

Most commonly, septic arthritis affects a single joint, but occasionally more joints are involved. The joints affected vary somewhat depending on the microbe causing the infection and the predisposing risk factors of the person affected. Septic arthritis is also called infectious arthritis.

Septic arthritis can be caused by bacteria, viruses, and fungi. The most common causes of septic arthritis are bacteria, including *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Haemophilus influenzae*. In certain "high-risk" individuals, other bacteria may cause septic arthritis, such as *E. coli* and *Pseudomonas spp.* in intravenous drug abusers and the elderly, *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* in sexually active young adults, and *Salmonella spp.* in young children or in people with sickle cell disease. Other bacteria that can cause septic arthritis include *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and the spirochete bacterium that causes Lyme disease.

Read full article:  
http://www.medicinenet.com/septic_arthritis/article.htm

**Juvenile Arthritis**

Juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) is the umbrella term under which several forms of chronic arthritis in children are categorized. Regardless of type, all of these conditions have several historical and/or clinical characteristics in common. One or more joints must demonstrate evidence of inflammation characterized by swelling of the joint area, limitation in the range of motion of the involved joint(s), tenderness when the joint is moved, and increased warmth of the joint region. These symptoms must be present (even intermittently) for at least six weeks and affect a child less than 16 years of age.

JIA is the most frequent chronic rheumatologic disease of childhood, and the cause(s) are not well understood. Both environmental and genetic influences are felt to contribute to the development of signs and symptoms of JIA. Knowledgeable specialists (pediatric rheumatologists usually affiliated with pediatric teaching hospitals) can help to limit the possibility of complications of juvenile idiopathic arthritis including leg-length discrepancy, joint contractures, and destruction and blindness due to inflammation of the eye (iritis).

Read full article:  
http://www.medicinenet.com/juvenile_arthritis/article.htm
Rheumatoid Arthritis Quiz

Q: Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is different from some other forms of arthritis because it ...
A: Affects the right and left sides of the body.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a type of chronic arthritis that typically occurs in joints on both sides of the body. This symmetry helps distinguish rheumatoid arthritis from many other types of arthritis.

Q: People with rheumatoid arthritis experience the most stiffness at night. True or False?
A: False.

In people with RA, muscle and joint stiffness are usually most prominent in the morning and after periods of inactivity.

Q: Surgery is the only way to treat RA. True or False?
A: False.

There are many different ways to treat rheumatoid arthritis. Treatments include medications, rest and exercise, and surgery to correct damage to the joint. The optimal type of treatment will depend on several factors, including the person's age, overall health, medical history, and severity of the arthritis.

Take the Rheumatoid Arthritis Quiz:
http://www.medicinenet.com/rheumatoid_arthritis_quiz/quiz.htm
What Causes Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is most commonly a result of aging cartilage. Aging cartilage progressively becomes stiffer and more vulnerable to wear and tear. Severe osteoarthritis can cause the cartilage to wear away virtually completely so that the adjacent bones in the joint rub together with use. This is referred to a “bone on bone” joint disease.

http://www.medicinenet.com/osteoarthritis_overview_pictures_slideshow/article.htm

Related Slideshows

**Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA): Learn about This Autoimmune Disease**

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that causes chronic joint inflammation and pain. Watch this slideshow to learn about the signs and symptoms of this disorder as well as how it is diagnosed, diet, medications and the latest in treatment options.

http://www.medicinenet.com/rheumatoid_arthritis_pictures_slideshow/article.htm

**Gout: Learn About Gouty Arthritis**

Gout and hyperuricemia are caused by uric acid crystals building up in the body. Watch this slideshow to learn about causes, symptoms, medication, diet and treatments for this painful condition.

http://www.medicinenet.com/gout_pictures_slideshow/article.htm

**Osteoarthritis Tips to Keep Your Joints Healthy**

Dealing with joint pain and arthritis? Keep joints healthy by keeping them moving. See these solutions for joint pain and tips to protect your joints from damage.

http://www.medicinenet.com/osteoarthritis_healthy_joints_pictures_slideshow/article.htm
**Patient Comments: Arthritis – Effective Treatments**

**Question:** What kinds of treatments have been effective for your arthritis?

Comment from: sasha61945, 65-74 Female (Patient) Published: December 30

I have arthritis in my right wrist, right shoulder and across the lower part of my back. I also have fibromyalgia. I now use essential oil of lavender directly on these areas and within minutes the pain is gone. For a couple months I've been doing this and all my pain is gone. Other essential oils that stops pain are essential oil of peppermint and marjoram.

Related Reading: arthritis | fibromyalgia

Comment from: Convinced, 75 or over Male (Patient) Published: October 07

I recently suffered from severe soreness in my right knee which eventually developed into such a painful condition I could not lift my leg or put weight on it to walk. After trying several home treatments, I finally went to an urgent care clinic where x-rays showed advanced arthritis in the joint. I was given a cortisone shot and within 3 hours, the pain was completely gone and I had regained complete use of my leg. It has been four days since I was given the injection and I am still pain-free and able to walk normally.

Related Reading: knee pain

Comment from: GFfood paradise, 45-54 Female (Patient) Published: July 31

After years of increasing joint pain and inflammation in my neck, mid and lower back, ankles and wrists, I began to give up hope. Doctors said I had some arthritis so I had tried Celebrex and many other medications that helped the pain symptoms, but did not get rid of them. Any exercise and many other activities (except being in the water) caused so much inflammation and pain that I could hardly move for several days afterward. My daughter was diagnosed with Celiac Disease 9 years ago, (the rest of our family tested negative), so I keep up with the latest news and findings in regards to that and Gluten Free diets. In the past few years I began to read more and more about arthritis and chronic inflammation (of many kinds) being helped by a Gluten Free diet. Finally in desperation, I tried going Gluten Free in January; within 2 weeks I could tell a major difference in my pain and it has only continued to get better since then. I can now move, bend, etc. pain-free for the first time in many years. I'm off all prescription drugs for arthritis and inflammation problems, and am exercising and enjoying many activities that I haven't been able to do in many years.

Related Reading: exercise | celiac disease | gluten-free diet

Suggested Reading on Arthritis on MedicineNet

Arthritis Center

Rheumatoid Arthritis
Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that causes chronic inflammation of the joints, the tissue around the joints, as well as other organs in the body. Because it can affect multiple other organs of the body, rheumatoid arthritis is referred to as a systemic illness and is sometimes called rheumatoid disease.

Read the rheumatoid arthritis article »

Visit the MedicineNet Arthritis Center:
http://www.medicinenet.com/arthritis/focus.htm
Suggested Reading on Arthritis Across the WebMD Network

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Arthritis Health Center on WebMD.com
http://www.webmd.com/arthritis/default.htm

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Arthritis Center on MedicineNet.com
http://www.medicinenet.com/arthritis/focus.htm

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