

Knee Arthritis: Non-operative Treatments That Can Help

By Jon S. Douchis, M.D.

Nearly half the American population will experience symptoms from knee arthritis. Osteoarthritis or "wear and tear" arthritis is the progressive loss of the cartilage surface that covers the bones where they meet to make joints. The normal healthy cartilage against cartilage articulation allows for minimal friction in our joints; in fact the coefficient of friction between healthy cartilage surfaces is less than 1/200 of an ice cube rubbing against another ice cube. Unfortunately, when the cartilage wears off the bone, bone starts rubbing against bone (crunching, catching, locking, stiffness) and the body responds with increased inflammation about the knee. This inflammatory cascade leads to pain, swelling, tenderness, even redness. What to do? The osteoarthritic wear can be mild, moderate or severe (based on radiographs, CT or MRI). Depending on the severity, different treatments may be effective. For mild to moderate osteoarthritis, physical therapy, non-impact exercise/conditioning and weight loss can help the symptoms. Anti-inflammatory medications (Celebrex, Mobic, naproxen, ibuprofen) and over-the-counter analgesics (tylenol/acetaminophen) can be safely used in many patients (need to consider other medical conditions prior to starting) without significant gastrointestinal, liver or cardiac side effects. Injections in the knee are commonly used and come in two varieties. First, cortisone, in a slow release formulation, can help reduce the body's inflammatory response to the osteoarthritis, hence reducing the symptoms for approximately 2-3 months. Another injection option is viscosupplementation (brands include Synvisc, Euflexa, Supartz, Hylgan, Orthovisc). These gel-like injections replenish the knee with hydrophilic macromolecules that are normally found in joint fluid. This helps with the pain, lubrication and cushioning in the joint. Relief can be for 6 months or longer and viscosupplements can be repeated every 6 months until they stop being effective. Be aware, neither a cortisone or viscosupplement injection heals the cartilage damage or slows the progression of the osteoarthritis. They only relieve the symptoms. But that is all that many sore knees with mild to moderate osteoarthritis are looking for.

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