



W HEALTH by Patricia Hagen

The Osteoarthritis Epidemic

Experts forecast an increasing problem with health condition

Arthritis experts worry about your knees. If current trends continue, they warn that almost half of you will develop osteoarthritis in a knee. Your chances of developing the painful joint disease are even higher if you're overweight, have had a knee injury or are female.

The number of osteoarthritis sufferers — already 27 million — is expected to explode as the huge group of overweight baby boomers move into their 50s and 60s.

"It's an epidemic, and it's getting worse," says Dr. John Hur. An orthopedic surgeon and Arthritis Foundation board member in Indianapolis, he notes that Indiana ranks among the states with highest rates of obesity and therefore arthritis.

"The vast majority of adults will develop osteoarthritis whether or not they like it," says Dr. Randall Reed, a rheumatologist for Hendricks Regional Health. "We certainly don't know how to prevent it."

Despite that, experts also want you to know that osteoarthritis is not inevitable. It is possible to reduce your risk of getting the disease in your knees.

Osteoarthritis, the most common type of arthritis, develops when a joint's cartilage breaks down. Cartilage, a tough, white, fibrous tissue, cushions the ends of bones and allows easy movement of the joints. But when cartilage thins or tears — because of age or injury — the bones rub against each other, causing pain and stiffness and reducing movement in the joint. This degenerative joint disease can affect any joint, but most commonly strikes knees, hips and hands.



"There are some rare conditions that are inherited that can lead to it," Reed says. "There's increased risk with prior injury to the joint."

But you can dramatically affect two important risk factors for osteoarthritis: overweight and inactivity.

Keep weight down

Obesity doubles the risk of osteoarthritis, because extra pounds put extra stress on the knees, says Hur of Methodist Sports Medicine/The Orthopedic Specialists. "Weight loss is really key in trying to minimize that risk."

A government study, published in September in *Arthritis Care & Research*, suggests adults have a 46 percent chance of developing osteoarthritis in a knee. The risk went up to 65 percent in people who are obese.

Overweight women are especially vulnerable if they have an extreme angle between hips and knees, Hur says. Poor leg alignment

leads to rubbing and pulling in the knee joint, and this uneven wear and tear on the cartilage increases the risk of arthritis.

It's interesting to note that a huge weight loss is not necessary: The Arthritis Foundation cites a study that found losing as few as 11 pounds can cut the risk of developing knee osteoarthritis by 50 percent for some women. Another study found some people with arthritis cut the pain in half by losing 15 pounds.

Hur says he's seen dramatic changes in some patients who lost weight. "They came back and said, 'My knees don't hurt anymore.' It's that remarkable."

Unfortunately, Hur notes, staying thin is no guarantee you'll avoid arthritis. "I see lots of people who are thin and have arthritis in their 40s," he says. In those cases, the patient often has a family history of the disease. They must go to Plan B, to find ways to manage the pain and modify their activities to slow down the deterioration of the affected joints.

Keep moving

A second way to reduce the risk of developing osteoarthritis in the knees is exercise. Not only does exercise help with weight control, but it helps to develop and maintain strong muscles that support the joints.

Hur also encourages low-impact exercise to reduce the risk of knee arthritis. "Avoiding high-impact activities can minimize the impact your knees see," he says.

He lists swimming, water aerobics, cycling, and using an elliptical machine among excellent ways to get a cardiovascular workout, which boosts the heart rate and improves lung capacity. "Those are all good ways to burn calories without putting a pounding on your knees," he says.

You also might reduce your risk of osteoarthritis by wearing well-cushioned shoes, such as running shoes, instead of hard, leather dress shoes. Athletic shoes act as shock absorbers, protecting the joints in your legs.

The good news surrounding osteoarthritis is it's a slow-progressing disease, Reed says.

"It develops slowly, and there are good ways to keep the symptoms at bay," he says. "It's not completely disabling; there are ways to get around it, even simple things like applying heat and cold."

"It's not all doom and gloom." ❧

Hagen, a freelance journalist based in Carmel, has been writing about health and fitness for more than 20 years.

Treating arthritis

Doctors offer a variety of arthritis-management options that include:

- > Lifestyle changes, including weight loss and exercise.
- > Physical therapy to strengthen and realign the feet, legs and back. Shoes can be modified to improve alignment. Using a cane might ease the pressure on joints.
- > Pain medication, including ibuprofen, and injections that deliver a dose of anti-inflammatory steroids to the joint.
- > Alternative options that include acupuncture and creams containing capsaicin, which can decrease pain.
- > Surgical options like partial or full knee replacements.

Sources: Dr. John Hur, Dr. Randall Reed, Arthritis Foundation, www.arthritis.org

Risk factors for osteoarthritis

- > Heredity
- > Overweight
- > Joint injury
- > Repeated overuse of certain joints
- > Lack of physical activity
- > Nerve injury
- > Aging

Symptoms of osteoarthritis

- > Pain or stiffness in joints after periods of inactivity or excessive use
- > Grating or catching sensation as joint moves
- > Bony growths on the outside of affected joints

Source: The Arthritis Foundation, www.arthritis.org