



Employee Benefits Newsletter

JULY 2009

July is Arthritis Awareness Month

What is arthritis? Arthritis is the inflammation of your joints, such as your knees, wrists or your spinal column.

The two most common types of arthritis are osteoarthritis (OA) and rheumatoid arthritis. The main symptoms involve the joints and include pain, stiffness, swelling, redness or decreased range of motion. Less common symptoms are fever, fatigue, rash, weight loss, breathing problems, dry eyes or mouth and night sweats.



What causes arthritis? Osteoarthritis, also called degenerative joint disease, is caused by the wear and tear of the cartilage which results in the bones grinding against each other. (Cartilage is a hard slick coating at the ends of the bones which allows them to slide smoothly over each other.) This can occur over a period of years or it can be accelerated by a joint injury or an infection.

Rheumatoid arthritis is caused by the body's immune system which attacks the joints causing inflammation on the synovium. (Synovium is a thin membrane that lines the joint enclosure which produces fluid to lubricate the joint.) This can eventually destroy cartilage and bone within the joint.

What are the risk factors? Family history, age, sex, previous joint injury and obesity are risk factors for arthritis. Some types of arthritis run in the family and with age your risk increases. Men are less likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis than women and people with previous joint injury are overall more likely to develop arthritis. Being overweight also increases your risk since excessive stress is being put on your joints.

Arthritis is not only a condition that affects adults. Approximately 294,000 children under the age of 18 are affected by juvenile arthritis and rheumatologic conditions according to the Prevalence of and Annual Ambulatory Health Care Visits for Pediatric Arthritis and Other Rheumatologic Conditions in the US in 2001 - 2004.

What causes juvenile arthritis? The cause of most forms of juvenile arthritis (JA) is still unknown. There is no proof that certain foods, toxins, allergies or the lack of vitamins play a role. Studies do show that there is a genetic predisposition to juvenile arthritis. The most common symptom of juvenile arthritis is inflammation. It is considered an autoimmune disease because the immune system is what is actually hurting the joints.

How is juvenile arthritis diagnosed? It is based on the patient's complete medical history and examination to rule out other causes. Often an evaluation by a pediatric rheumatologist or a rheumatologist is required, along with laboratory work, including urine and blood test. X-rays, ultrasound, CT scans or MRI scans may also be needed to check the condition of the joints.

What are the types of juvenile arthritis? The three most common forms of juvenile arthritis are:

Polyarticular juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, which affects five or more joints. It is more common in girls than boys and affects the knees, wrists and ankles. It may also affect other weight bearing joints such as the hips, neck, shoulders or jaw and affects both sides of the body.

Pauciarticular juvenile arthritis, affects four or less joints and it is usually the large joints. It only affects one side of the body and may cause eye inflammation which is seen most frequently in young girls.

Systemic onset juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, affects boys and girls equally causing high fevers of 103 degrees or more, which last for weeks or months. The patient may also experience a rash of pale red spots on the chest and thighs. It affects the small joints of the body such as the hands, wrist or ankles.

Having to deal with the pain is the hardest part of having arthritis, but it can be managed. The first step is to find out what type of arthritis you have and deciding on the type of treatment.

