

# Arthritis

## Hobart Osteopathic Clinic

### Osteopath

#### WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Aching and swelling of joints is all too common particularly in the cold winter months. This is commonly known as Arthritis.

Arthritis refers to inflammation or degeneration of a joint. This can happen in the larger joints that bear weight such as the hips, knees and in the spine or in the smaller joints such as the fingers, wrists and toes. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis that affects more than 1.3 million Australians according to the Australian Department of Health and Aging. It is more common in women than men, and with increases with age.

#### How can I tell if I have osteoarthritis?

With osteoarthritis the joints become increasingly painful when under load such as the knee or hip after walking. There may also be swelling in the joint. When the spine is affected it is painful to bend and your back may ache after long periods of sitting still. You ache and feel stiff particularly in the mornings. It is worse in the winter because the muscles tighten up and circulation to the outer parts of the body is not so good. Your joints become less mobile and may become weaker as muscles may sometimes waste away around the joint.

Don't forget that there are other causes of achy, swollen joints and painful muscles – make sure you get some expert help in diagnosis so that you can take the correct action. Don't just assume that your problem is arthritis – it could be something much easier to cure!

#### What causes osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis, often called 'wear and tear,' is caused by a process of inflammation of the smooth cartilage surrounding a joint. The surface becomes less smooth and eventually wears away. With normal use a joint can last for a lifetime, however abnormal or excessive use, or having an injury to the joint can cause the wear to accelerate. Old football injuries to joints, car accidents, years of heavy lifting or doing repetitive activities such as squatting, kneeling, assembly line or even computer work that excessively uses joints can accelerate the 'wear and tear' process. Being overweight also puts strain on joints of the knee, hip and spine and is a big contributing factor to the pain of Osteoarthritis. It is not a purely mechanical issue, however, but also affected by diet and other aspects of general health.

#### How does Osteoarthritis affect the spine?

Age overuse and injury all lead to drying out and thinning of the discs between the vertebrae of the spine. With less spacing between the vertebrae, the bones become closer together with greater

rubbing pressure on the small joints in the back, causing inflammation, swelling and pain. Small bony ridges or spurs can form on the vertebrae – these are visible on X-ray pictures. Swelling, combined with the bony ridges, can intrude on the spaces where nerves come out from the spine and cause complications such as numbness or tingling or weakness in the legs or arms.

### What can Osteopaths do to prevent or treat Osteoarthritis?

First of all a good assessment of the situation is vital. Often people assume that their ache or pain is due to arthritis when this may not be the problem at all, or it may be mild arthritis combined with muscle tension or other issues.

Osteopathic treatment cannot cure arthritis or even reverse arthritic change in joints. Instead it aims to reduce pain and stiffness so that you can lead a more normal life.

Often other parts of the body may also be in trouble. For example an arthritic knee may affect the hip, pelvis or lower back causing extra problems such as back or hip pain. This can also work in reverse – the aggravated hip or back then causes postural changes which go on to make the knee feel even worse. Treatment by an osteopath aims to assess and solve these other issues in order to improve overall body function. Your osteopath can also offer advice on the right forms of gentle exercise that can help mobilise the affected joints and release surrounding muscle tension

### What are some other things I can do to help my arthritis?

There are several things that you can do yourself to help. It is really important to stay fit and active. Arthritis Tasmania runs excellent warm water exercise classes – these really are worth the trouble of getting wet! Ring Arthritis Tasmania on 1800 011 041 and join. They also offer Tai Chi for arthritis and other forms of support. You can discuss your arthritis and other health issues with a qualified Naturopath, who will be able to suggest herbs and dietary modifications that may be of benefit.