



Dr. Wade Elliott with patient Patricia Cooper at the Regional Joint Assessment Centre, showing her how OA, the “wear and tear” disease, affects the knee.

Osteoarthritis & You

WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

Approximately 3 million Canadians suffer from osteoarthritis (OA) and it is one of the most common causes of joint pain. OA is essentially a “wear and tear” disease that affects the overlying cartilage of joints, exposing pain sensitive fibres. Most commonly it affects the knees and hips but can affect any joint. Patients with OA most often present with pain and sometimes swelling and as it becomes more severe, the pain will often affect the ability to use the affected joint. OA often has a significant impact on quality of life and is one of the leading causes of disability, including the ability to participate in exercise, sports and even activities of daily living such as walking.

Total joint replacements are the most definitive surgical procedure to treat osteoarthritis and an excellent treatment option for appropriate patients, however, the procedure is typically only reserved for patients with severe pain and significant loss of function. As osteoarthritis is a degenerative, chronic problem, many patients just learn to live with their pain until they are candidates for joint replacement. There are, however, many treatment options other than surgical procedures that can help to alleviate the pain and disability of OA.

The first treatment is also one of the easiest to do. Exercise! Exercise has many benefits to our health, including cardiovascular,

weight loss and well being. It can also decrease or improve mobility of joints with OA. That’s why exercise for those with OA should be mild to moderate and involve low impact, non-pivoting activities such as walking, swimming, cycling and cross country skiing. Exercise should be the first line of treatment for all patients, unless you have been advised not to exercise due to other medical reasons by your physician.

A guided physiotherapy program can also be beneficial to patients. A good physiotherapist will use various techniques to help alleviate pain and swelling, improve range of motion and flexibility of the joint, as well as correct strength imbalances. Physiotherapy will not cure OA but can improve pain and function, often for years, and assist in delaying or eliminating the need for surgeries. Even if you require a surgical procedure such as joint replacement, guided strengthening and flexibility programs are essential to maximizing your recovery after surgery.

Sometimes injections in the affected joint can also be an effective treatment option. There are basically two types of injections. Local steroid (cortisone) injections have been used for many years and can provide temporary relief of joint pain, especially if swelling is present. However, the results are typically temporary. Another newer type of injection called viscosupplementation involves injecting a lubricant substance called hyaluronic acid, which is a normal component of the fluid in all joints. It is synthetically made and when injected into joints with OA, it acts more like a lubricating and cushioning substance. Viscosupplementation typically works best in patients who are moderately active and can sometimes last for several months.

While many patients with osteoarthritis will ultimately require total joint replacement surgery, the timing of surgery can often be delayed, sometimes for years, by using a multi-treatment approach. This may include any or all of the treatments discussed, as well as prescription and over-the-counter medicine. If you have osteoarthritis or unexplained joint pains, the best approach is to discuss your joint pain with your physician and develop an individual treatment plan as early as possible. Remember, an ounce of prevention...



The Regional Joint Assessment Centre Team