

Joint Pain and Stiffness

The Doctor called Mrs. Cohen saying "Mrs. Cohen, your cheque came back." Mrs. Cohen answered "So did my arthritis!" Henry Youngman

There are many kinds of arthritis but the two most common kinds are Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and Osteoarthritis (OA). OA is the most common form of arthritis and is age and/or activity related wear and tear on the joints. Over the years this wear and tear wears away the cartilage between the bones until the bones themselves are rubbing off each other leading to pain and stiffness.

RA is thought to be linked to an autoimmune reaction of the body against the lining of the joints. It can be associated with flu like symptoms, weight loss, feeling of ill health, and inflammation, swelling, redness, pain and stiffness in the affected joints. Usually more than one joint is affected at a time and over time it can lead to deformity and loss of function in the joint. There can be periods where it flares up and is bad, and periods where your joints feel better.

One of our natural reactions to pain and stiffness in our joints is to stop moving the joint to protect ourselves from the pain. However when we stop moving a joint we reduce the circulation to the joints, we reduce the amount of synovial fluid (the body's WD40) which lubricates the joints increasing joint stiffness, and we also cause the muscles around the joint to stiffen up. This can all lead to additional stiffness and pain around the joint.

By moving we can increase the circulation to the joints, work our muscles to prevent them becoming stiff, and produce synovial fluid to oil the joints. The movements do not need to be large ones. Small movements within a range that does **not** cause you pain are suitable.

For stiff hips and knees try bend and straighten the whole leg when sitting down. For your shoulder, stand leaning forward with your weight supported through your good hand on a sturdy table, and to allow the sore shoulder to swing back and forward and in little circles.

Outside of home exercising in a swimming pool is excellent, as the water takes the weight off your joints, and also provides some resistance meaning the muscles work a little harder and stay stronger. You don't have to swim, walking, floating kicking your legs, or performing simple exercises with your arms are all beneficial. Alternatively easy stationary cycling is another good way to move your hip and knee joints and exercise your muscles. Also consider gentle yoga or tai chi as these are great exercises to stretch the muscles and move the joints. Let your instructor know about any joint pain you have.

As mentioned above the muscles around the joint can stiffen up, and weaken. They can also be a source of pain. Massage from a Physical Therapist is helpful in loosening out the muscles helping them to feel less stiff. This may help to reduce the pain felt in the joints too. A Physical Therapist can also help passively move the joint. This advantage of this is that they can move the joint into a greater range than you may be able to because of your muscle stiffness or guarding. This will help with circulation in and around the joint.

If you suspect you have arthritis first talk to your doctor about what medications or supplements you can take to ease the pain and inflammation, and then contact your Physical Therapist to find out more about massage and exercises to ease stiffness and retain your range of movement.

Alternatively to help with your joint pain you could move to a different climate where the weather is warm and atmospheric pressure is high! Research published in the Proceedings of Western Pharmacology Society found that patients with OA had more pain when the air pressure was low, while low temperatures increased the risk of joint pain in patients with Rheumatoid Arthritis.

Karen Doyle is a Physical Therapist from the Maple Clinic in Booterstown and is a member of the Irish Association of Physical Therapists. If you have any questions on the article above, or would like to find out more about joint specific treatment, please feel free to contact Karen on info@mapleclinic.ie, by phone at 086-4030473, or visit her website www.mapleclinic.ie