Osteoarthritis in Young People

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Can Young People Get Osteoarthritis?

When we think about osteoarthritis we usually think about a condition affecting older adults. However, the degeneration and damage of the joints can happen in young people as well. Let's review how osteoarthritis is different in these cases and how can be treated.

Osteoarthritis in Older People

The typical osteoarthritis diagnosed in individuals in the fourth, fifth and sixth decades of their lives is also known as primary osteoarthritis. The exact cause is not known, but age is one of the biggest factors that cause wear and tear of the protective cartilages on the ends of the bones. Your risk of OA increases significantly as you get older. Genes may also play a role, as does obesity, joint injuries, certain occupations, like those that involve repetitive stress on the joints, bone deformities and other medical conditions (i.e. diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, gout).

Osteoarthritis in Young People

When osteoarthritis develops in younger adults it is most often called secondary osteoarthritis, as there is an underlying condition that occurs first. For example, prior joint injuries, especially those resulting from an accident or sports, and joint surgery precede osteoarthritis. Chronic joint inflammation (as it happens in rheumatoid arthritis) or joint infections can also raise the risk of osteoarthritis.

Less common causes of secondary OA in young adults include conditions such as:

- **Ehlers Danlos syndrome –** A rare inherited disease characterized by joint hypermobility.
- **Legg-Calve-Perthes disease and congenital hip dislocation** – Diseases affecting the muscles and connective tissues.
- **Avascular necrosis –** A condition associated with temporary or permanent loss of blood supply to bone.
- **Certain metabolic disorders –** An example is hemocromathosis, a genetic condition that allows too much iron to be absorbed and stored throughout the body, including the joints.

Managing OA as a Young Person

Since OA develops secondary to other conditions, it is crucial to manage first the underlying condition wherever possible. For example, if septic arthritis (joint infection) is treated promptly, you will be less likely to develop osteoarthritis. Controlling the joint inflammation and flare ups in rheumatoid arthritis can also decrease the risk of secondary osteoarthritis. Beside standard treatment, there are a few things you can do to help your joints healthy and pain free:

- **Stay active –** Regular exercise helps improve the blood flow to the joints, maintain their mobility and decrease pain. Remember that the overuse of joints can be also a cause of OA, and therefore you need to

do activities that are gentle on your joints. Ask a physiotherapist for a customized fitness plan for your joints. Swimming in warm water pool is a great option, since the water supports the weight of your body, which means less strain on your joints. Tai chi helps not only relieve OA pain, but also improves your overall health and stress levels. Strengthening exercises aim to improve the strength and tone of the muscles that control the joints, and therefore will protect and keep the joint more stable.

- **Eat right –** A healthy diet, like a Mediterranean diet, will help with weight management and also prevent nutrient deficiencies that increase your risk or aggravate osteoarthritis. Deficiencies in vitamin C, E, D have been linked osteoarthritis in research studies. Supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin, or avocado-soybean unsaponifiables had been shown positive effects to manage OA- ask a healthcare professional about all these options.