

ARTHRITIS.

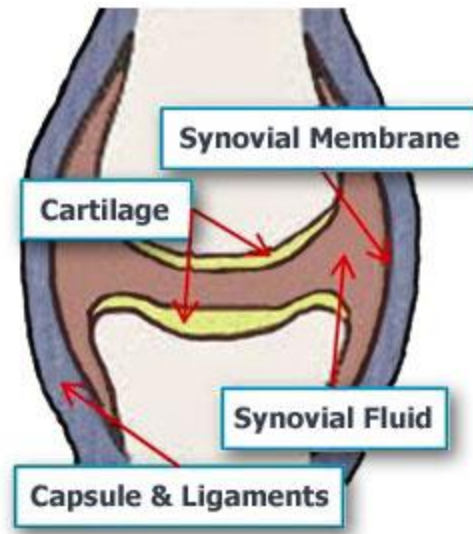
Arthritis is not a single disease - it is a term that covers over 100 medical conditions. **Osteoarthritis (OA)** is the most common form of arthritis and generally affects elderly patients. Some forms of arthritis can affect people at a very early age.

In Kenya, Researchers at Kenyatta National Hospital and the University of Nairobi recently tracked 60 rheumatoid arthritis patients at the hospital and concluded that the disease was increasingly attacking younger Kenyans. The researchers led by Dr B.O. Owino of KNH, say the disease peaks at two age brackets; at between 20 and 29 when most would be expected to be entering the job market and again at age 40 to 49 when most should be at the peak of their careers.

According to the study, published in the May issue of the East African Medical Journal, the disease was previously known to peak at age 43 but now there are increasing cases of it peaking below 20 years.

What causes arthritis?

In order to better understand what is going on when a person suffers from some form of arthritis, let us look at how a joint works.



A joint is where one bone moves on another bone. Ligaments hold the two bones together. The ligaments are like elastic bands, while they keep the bones in place your muscles relax or contract to make the joint move.

Cartilage covers the bone surface to stop the two bones from rubbing directly against each other. The covering of cartilage allows the joint to work smoothly and painlessly.

A capsule surrounds the joint. The space within the joint - the joint cavity - has synovial fluid which nourishes the joint and the cartilage.

What causes arthritis?

Several factors contribute to an individual developing this common problem. Some of the risk factors that can cause arthritis include:

- **Genetics**

There are likely genetic variations that can contribute to the cause of arthritis. Some families tend to have a predisposition to developing arthritis.

- **Age**

Cartilage becomes more brittle with age and has less of a capacity to repair itself. As people grow older they are more likely to develop arthritis.

- **Weight**

Joint damage is partly dependent on the load the joint has to support. This is especially true of the hips and knees that can be worn quickly in heavier patients.

- **Previous Injury**

Joint damage can cause irregularities in the normal smooth joint surface. Previous major injuries can be part of the cause of arthritis.

- **Occupational Hazards**

Workers in some specific occupations seem to have a higher risk of developing arthritis than other jobs. These are primarily high demand jobs such as assembly line workers and heavy construction.

- **Some High-Level Sports**

It is difficult to determine how much sports participation contributes to development of arthritis. Certainly, sports participation can lead to joint injury and subsequent arthritis. Some high impact sports that require intense joint mobility like tennis and squash sometimes lead to knee and elbow arthritis. Sports that predispose to knee injuries like soccer or rugby can sometimes cause a type of arthritis known as osteoarthritis.

- **Illness or Infection**

People who experience a joint infection (septic joint), multiple episodes of gout, or other medical conditions, can develop arthritis of the joint. A common and very painful form of arthritis is known as gouty arthritis, which is a result of gout.

Types of arthritis

There are over 100 types of arthritis, some of the common ones are:

- **Osteoarthritis** - cartilage loses its elasticity. If the cartilage is stiff it becomes damaged more easily. The cartilage, which acts as a shock absorber, will gradually wear away in some areas. As the cartilage becomes damaged tendons and ligaments become stretched, causing pain. Eventually the bones may rub against each other causing very severe pain. Old joint injuries may predispose one to developing osteoarthritis at a later age.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis** - this is an inflammatory form of arthritis. The synovial membrane is attacked, resulting in swelling and pain. If left untreated the arthritis can lead to deformity of the joints. Rheumatoid arthritis is significantly more common in women than men and generally strikes when the patient is aged between 40 and 60. However, children and much older people may also be affected. A blood test is often done to confirm Rheumatoid Arthritis.
- **Infectious arthritis (septic arthritic)** - an infection in the synovial fluid and tissues of a joint. It is usually caused by bacteria, but could also be caused by fungi or viruses. Bacteria, fungi or viruses may spread through the bloodstream from infected tissue nearby, and infect a joint. Most susceptible people are those who already have some form of arthritis and develop an infection that travels in the bloodstream.
- **Juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (JRA)** - means arthritis that affects a person aged 16 or less. There are three main types: in its most common and mildest form, the child experiences pain in up to 4 joints. Polyarticular JRA affects more joints and is more severe. As time goes by it tends to get worse.

Systemic JRA is the least common but most serious. Pain is experienced in many joints and can spread to organs.

What are the signs and symptoms of arthritis?

The symptoms of arthritis depend on the type of arthritis, for example:

Osteoarthritis - The symptoms develop slowly and get worse as time goes by. There is pain in a joint, either during or after use, or after a period of inactivity. Tender and stiff joints **especially first thing in the morning**. The patient may find it harder to use the joint - it loses its flexibility and may swell. Some patients experience a grating sensation when they use the joint.

Rheumatoid arthritis - The patient often finds the same joints in each side of the body are painfully swollen, inflamed, and stiff. The fingers, arms, legs and wrists are most commonly affected. Symptoms are usually **worst on waking up in the morning and the stiffness can last for 30 minutes at this time**. The joint is tender when touched.

The smaller joints especially the hands are usually noticeably affected first. As the arthritis progresses it spreads from the smaller joints in your hands, wrists, ankles and feet to your elbows, knees, hips, neck, shoulders and even jaw.

- **Infectious arthritis** - fever, joint inflammation, swelling and severe pain. It is common in children in Kenya, often symptoms are linked to an injury or another illness. Most commonly affected areas are the knee, shoulder, elbow, wrist and finger. In the majority of cases, just one joint is affected. This is a **serious condition that requires admission to prevent sepsis** and preserve joint integrity as it can cause disability if not treated well.

- **Juvenile rheumatoid arthritis** – occurs in children who experience fevers which tend to peak in the evening and then suddenly disappear. Appetite is poor there may be loss of weight. Swollen and tender joints may occur, and the child may start to limp.

TREATMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF ARTHRITIS:

The goal of treatment of arthritis is to reduce joint pain and inflammation while preventing damage and improving and maintaining joint function

As a first step, rest, heat/cold applications such as ice packs and hot water bottles, and topical pain creams such as 'Deep Heat' can be helpful for cases of mild arthritis.

For osteoarthritis, food supplements such as glucosamine (found in local preparations like "Seven Seas" or Cod Liver Oil have been helpful for some, increasing the dietary fish intake and/or fish oil capsules (omega-3 capsules) can sometimes reduce the inflammation of arthritis.

Weight reduction is recommended for patients who are overweight and have early signs of osteoarthritis of the hands, because they are at a risk for also developing osteoarthritis of their knees. Even modest weight reduction can be helpful.

In severe cases medical treatment is recommended. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are medications that are used to reduce pain as well as inflammation in the joints. Examples of NSAIDs include aspirin, Brufen, and Diclofenac. It is sometimes possible to use NSAIDs temporarily and then discontinue them for periods of time without

recurrent symptoms, thereby decreasing the risk of side effects in the stomach such as stomach upset, cramping diarrhea, ulcers, and even bleeding.

Arthritis that is caused by an overactive immune system (such as rheumatoid arthritis) frequently requires medications that suppress the immune system and a visit to a specialist doctor- a rheumatologist, will be required.

Other Therapy

Patients with arthritis may benefit from conservative measures such as rest, exercise, weight reduction, physical and occupational therapy for those with joint deformities, and mechanical support devices. These measures are particularly important when large, weight-bearing joints are involved, such as the hips or knees. Medications are used in combination with the physical measures.

Resting sore joints decreases stress on the joints, and relieves pain and swelling. Patients are asked to simply decrease the intensity and/or frequency of the activities that consistently cause joint pain.

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