

What Are the Long Term Effects of Arthritis?

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Arthritis is a chronic disease that can cause injury to joints, tendons and their surrounding soft tissues. Often associated with older men and women, in reality, arthritis can affect people of all ages. It can range from minor discomfort to complete debilitation, requiring extensive medical treatment.

The primary issue with arthritis is inflammation of the joints. One of the most common types is rheumatoid arthritis, which can affect not only the joints but can lead to dozens of other complications as well. Other types of arthritis include osteoarthritis and gout that results from joint infections.

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that is one of the most commonly diagnosed types of joint disease. It is called an autoimmune disease because the tissues of the body mistake themselves as invaders that seek and destroy themselves. Unlike other types of arthritis, RA can manifest itself by other symptoms such as fatigue, morning stiffness, loss of appetite and overall fatigue.

Most patients suffering from RA endure a lifelong process. However, there can be periods of complete remission where the RA patient exhibits no symptoms at all. It typically affects those between the ages of 40 and 60 but can be seen in much younger patients as well. Simple tasks like opening jars with lids or turning door knobs becomes excruciating.

RA can also cause a number of other non-joint problems that affect the mouth, eyes and other organs. With Sjogren's syndrome, the lining of the lungs leads to shortness of breath, chest pain and coughing. The pericardium, or the lining that surrounds the heart, can cause chest pain that often intensifies with changes in posture.

RA can lead to anemia or a reduced number of red and white blood cells. Low white blood cell counts can impair the healing process in a number of diseases.

Osteoarthritis

Unlike RA, osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease that attacks the joints over time through normal wear and tear. The normal pressure of gravity (especially in those who are overweight) can cause a subtle degeneration of the joints that results in pain and loss of range of motion. Osteoarthritis affects more than 21 million men and women, usually with advancing age. The most common joints affected by osteoarthritis are the knees, hips and hands.

Gout

Gout is an arthritic disease that is caused by elevated levels of uric acid in the blood. In addition to causing joint problems, high uric acid can also cause kidney stones and nerve damage.

Gout becomes serious when large amounts of uric acid crystals, called tophi, accumulate in the hands, feet, elbow, Achilles tendons and even the ear. Tophi can cause severe deformities, chronic pain and nerve disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome.

Gout usually takes at least 10 years to develop, causing damage to the joints as well as the kidneys.

Ankylosing Spondylitis

Another form of arthritis that attacks primarily the spine is ankylosing spondylitis. It can also affect the hips, shoulders and knees and can affect not only bone tissue but also the tendons and ligaments around the joints.

Other Types of Arthritis

Other lesser known types of arthritis include bursitis, fibromyalgia, psoriatic arthritis, reactive arthritis and scleroderma.

Bursitis is characterized by an inflammation of the bursae, or small, fluid-filled sacs that line the joints and cushion the bones against each other. Bursitis results in pain, tenderness and a limited range of motion.

Fibromyalgia is caused by pain and stiffness that supports the joints -- particularly the tendons and ligaments. It most commonly affects the muscles and tendons of the neck, spine, hips and shoulders.

Psoriatic arthritis is a scaling skin disorder and affects the fingernails, toenails and the joints at the end of the fingers.

Reactive arthritis is a secondary type of infection that occurs during diseases involving the urinary tract and intestines and can also cause a number of eye problems, skin disorders and sores in the mouth.

Scleroderma, like rheumatoid arthritis, is an autoimmune disease that affects not only the joints but also the skin and blood vessels by producing excess collagen, a fibrous material found in many organs.