

FIRST NATIONAL ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION LECTURE

HOW TO COPE WITH ARTHRITIS

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Arthritis is a serious medical problem with an enormous economic impact on patients, their families, and the work force of the country. In the United States it has been estimated that 31 million people are afflicted with some form of arthritis. It affects one person out of seven and one family out of three

Because joint aches and pains are so common to everyday life, many people ignore the early warning symptoms of the onset of a serious form of arthritis. Most of the time, especially in osteoarthritis, this is a slow gradual wear-and-tear type problem that is not particularly serious. But delay in recognizing rheumatoid arthritis could result in severe disability. In some of the rare forms of arthritis such as systemic lupus erythematosus, the delay in seeking medical help, and the failure of doctors to recognize the early features of the disease, could result in damage to vital organs of the body, or even in death.

Even in the fully developed countries of the world arthritis is not well recognized as a serious health problem and the subject is poorly taught in medical schools and often ignored by the medical profession. Too often doctors fail to recognize that "Arthritis" is not one uniform disease but an entire group of conditions that embraces over 120 different and distinct diseases. The outcome of each condition is different and different medications and treatments are needed to control the unique features of each arthritic disease. Both the poorly trained physician and the unfortunate patient are resigned to the attitude that nothing can be done or that the only solution is eventual major surgery with replacement of diseased joints.

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In England, a pioneering effort was made to establish a new subspecialty of internal medicine called Rheumatology, dedicated to the investigation and treatment of the various forms of arthritis. However, it was only in the 1960's that Rheumatology was recognized as a separate speciality in the U.S. and training centres were set up in leading medical schools. Since then, through the close collaboration of orthopedic surgeons, rheumatologists, and immunologists, the cause and treatment of many conditions are becoming known. Great advances have been made in surgical technique and the design of effective and long-lasting artificial joints, and in the development of new diagnostic tests and more potent medications that can arrest and control the relentless progression of arthritis.

Let us now talk briefly about the early warning signs of arthritis. The two most common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Together they account for 7 out of 10 patients with arthritis.

One important early warning sign is persistent pain, swelling, and tenderness in the joints. Another is generalized stiffness of all the joints in the morning accompanied by increased pain. This is particularly true of rheumatoid arthritis.

Of course even common harmless diseases such as a flu or cold can cause generalized aches and pains. But these symptoms should not last longer than six weeks. If you continue to hurt after a six week period then you should seek medical advice.

In the United States it has been found that there is as much as a 4-year delay before patients seek help in the slowly progressive joint diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis. During this period some irreversible damage to the joints may have taken place.

The reason joints become swollen and painful is due to inflammation of the tissues around the joints.

There are now many potent medications that can stop inflammation and reduce the damage to the joints. However they are all expensive. A very cheap and effective drug is aspirin. It works as well as any of the newer medications but it needs a lot of skill in administration because large numbers of tablets have to be taken everyday. I often prescribe as many as 15 tablets of aspirin a day. Obviously you need to be guided by a doctor to avoid serious side effects.

Cortisone, a natural hormone, was introduced in the 1950's. It works like a miracle drug in controlling the symptoms of arthritis. Unfortunately it has many very serious side effects and should not be indiscriminately used by doctors and patients.

All over the world there are many quack remedies and strange unscientific treatments that are of no value and may actually be extremely harmful to patients. A black pill imported from Hong Kong and China was sold in the United States for arthritis which caused nine deaths reported in San Francisco in 1979.

Many of these remedies are worthless and they include most of the diets that are recommended in various cookbooks for "Arthritis." But because the arthritis condition may sometimes spontaneously go into a period of inactivity called a remission we get reports of miracle cures from these treatments. In the long run you are better off in the hands of a skilled and conscientious doctor who tries to approach your disease in an orthodox and scientific manner.

Research is continuing throughout the world and is increasing in momentum as we learn more about the basic nature of these illnesses. The enthusiastic support of informed organisations like yourselves is invaluable in our struggle to conquer these crippling diseases. Proper advice, and careful attention to good nutrition and correct exercises will allow you to enjoy a productive and happy life.