This Is What Osteoarthritis Feels Like

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What Does Arthritis Feel Like

Osteoarthritis is a type of arthritis that people think of when they think of their elderly relative's everyday aches and pains. It's a degenerative kind of arthritis, although there are some forms of OA which are inflammatory.

The difference between osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis is that with OA, cartilage loss is the most pronounced side effect, and with RA, the inflammation can affect the rest of the body as well.

Even though it is widely recognized as a kind of "wear and tear" arthritis, osteoarthritis can occur in anyone, at any age. It is also very common to develop OA if you are an athlete or have suffered certain kinds of injury. It's also common to discover you have osteoarthritis when you are being treated for an injury of some kind.

Learning To Cope

The biggest complaint most anyone has about managing life with osteoarthritis is finding ways to live comfortably with the pain, stiffness, and fatigue. It's like a 24/7, 365 day a year headache or a toothache, but in your hip. Or knees. Or hands. Pretty much anywhere you have cartilage, and you are at risk for OA pain.

It wasn't until I was diagnosed with chronic costochondritis (inflammation of the cartilage in my ribs) that I even knew I had cartilage in my ribs! Along with trying various chronic pain management strategies, it is exhausting to live with chronic pain. It can leave you vulnerable to other symptoms to manage including insomnia, stomach upset, anxiety and depression.

So while you are trying to navigate doctor's appointments, physical therapy, and routine blood tests, you are stretched thin with work and family commitments at the same time.

Diagnosing Osteoarthritis

It's possible you could be developing osteoarthritis and not even be aware of it. I first learned of my diagnosis after an x-ray for knee pain from a twist in Zumba class. Initially diagnosed with a torn meniscus, the x-ray showed cartilage loss in my knee.

When the surgeon went in to repair the damage, he discovered so much more cartilage loss that they did a microfracture procedure to simulate cartilage with scar tissue.

Had it not been for the torn meniscus, my OA could have taken years to diagnose. About a year after the knee surgery, I suffered nerve damage on the same leg from a German Shepherd attack. It is still difficult to determine what pain I'm trying to treat.

The Signs of OA

If you have more than one medical condition, and even if you don't, keep an eye on these symptoms that could be a sign of OA.

- **Osteoarthritis feels like achy joints when you wake up in the morning.** If you walk around a bit and start to feel a little better, this could be a sign of OA. Stiffness from standing or sitting too long in one position could indicate it as well.
- **If the range of motion in your shoulders, arms, hands or fingers is not what it used to be**, or if you are having trouble doing things with your hands like opening jars, you could be developing OA.
- **Running a low-grade fever is often associated with inflammatory arthritis**, but you can have inflammation without it necessarily showing up as rheumatoid arthritis in your bloodwork. Keep an eye if you get low-grade fevers with no other symptoms and pass as quickly as they appeared. That could be a sign of a flare-up.
- **If you suspect that you have arthritis, bring your concerns and a list of symptoms to your regular doctor.** They will refer to you to a rheumatologist. X-ray can detect osteoarthritis, and other forms of arthritis can be diagnosed with blood tests, family history, and X-ray.

What Arthritis Feels Like, Emotionally

Even if you get your physical OA symptoms under control, living with osteoarthritis, or any chronic pain condition is a stress on your emotional system.

Insomnia causes irritability. You may find that situations you used to have the patience for, you don't anymore. If you have never carved out time to take care of yourself, this is the best time to start.

The biggest factors that can impact your symptoms are getting enough sleep, managing weight with good nutrition, stress management, and clear communication. You need to set boundaries because there will be times you need to take care of yourself first. Some people in your life may find that difficult to adjust to.

How to Overcome the Emotional Side Effects of OA

- **Join an online or in-person support group focusing on chronic pain or arthritis.** Talking with other people that are living with the same symptoms can help you feel understood, and they can provide you with suggestions for everyday OA problems.
- **Before an event, explain to friends and family what you think you may need to successfully participate.** It may mean getting a ride, leaving early, or having physical supports in place wherever you are.
- **Keep a journal of your feelings and track your symptoms to see if you're able to notice a pattern.** There are so many factors at play it can be hard to pinpoint just one or two in isolation.
- **Help someone else: participate in a volunteer opportunity whenever you feel able.** Research has shown that it can distract you from your pain and helps you feel good overall.

Take It Easy

You will have good days, bad days, and monotonous days. Remembering to be kind to yourself is one of the best things you can do. Try not to let the frustrations weigh you down for too long.

Keeping a gratitude journal and reading inspirational literature can help train your brain to focus on the positive.

Living with pain affects your health, your job, your friendships, and your romantic relationships. If you start to feel overwhelmed, be sure to reach out.

Don't let your osteoarthritis keep you from enjoying your life. You may be surprised at what modifications you would benefit from using.