How to Tell the Difference Between Inflammatory Arthritis and Osteoarthritis

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Osteoarthritis vs. Inflammatory Arthritis

If you are confused about what having arthritis may mean for you, you are not alone. It may surprise you to learn that arthritis refers to joint pain, swelling and inflammation, and includes over 100 different joint diseases. Sadly, arthritis is one of the most common types of disability, affecting millions of adults and children. Because there are so many types of arthritis, it can be a challenge to make sense of a diagnosis, so be sure to discuss your unique health concerns with your doctor. For this article in particular, we will be looking at the difference between osteoarthritis vs. inflammatory arthritis.

You may be familiar with the phrase inflammatory arthritis, or perhaps you have been recently diagnosed with this painful condition. What sets inflammatory arthritis apart from other forms of the disease? The primary difference is that inflammatory arthritis is an autoimmune disease. Read on to better understand the signs, symptoms and treatment options of inflammatory arthritis.

How Do You Know if You Have Inflammatory Arthritis?

Your doctor will diagnose your inflammatory arthritis by reviewing your medical history, conducting a physical examination and evaluating blood tests and x-rays. Through this, your healthcare team can determine if you have inflammatory arthritis. You will likely need to see a rheumatologist, a doctor who specializes in autoimmune disorders. Unfortunately, this painful disease can affect nearly anyone, regardless of their age, gender and ethnicity. However, your risk of developing inflammatory arthritis may be increased by your genetics, age and lifestyle choices.

Types of inflammatory arthritis include rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and gout. In addition, people with lupus may experience inflammatory arthritis as part of that condition. Other types of inflammatory arthritis include ankylosing spondylitis, Lyme disease, psoriatic arthritis and more. Talk with your healthcare team right away if you have concerns; early detection and treatment can go a long way in managing and treating this disease.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Inflammatory Arthritis?

There are several common symptoms to be mindful of, including joint pain and stiffness. These symptoms may occur after a night’s sleep or after being sedentary. You may also notice a warm sensation in your joints, and redness and swelling in the joint area. In addition, you may see inflammation on your skin. Still, your doctor may also discover that your inflammatory arthritis is causing inflammation in internal organs, such as your heart and lungs. Over time, this disease will cause the affected joints to become deformed, unstable and scarred. Sadly, this damage cannot be repaired.

The joints typically affected by inflammatory arthritis include hands, feet and knees. Some people with this

condition have periods of respite, followed by what is known as painful flare-ups. In addition to joint pain, inflammatory arthritis may also cause muscle aches, fatigue and low fevers. If you begin to notice these symptoms, it is essential to discuss them with your healthcare team right away. On the other hand, osteoarthritis typically causes pain, stiffness and a reduced range of motion localized to the affected joints.

How Does Inflammatory Arthritis Differ From Osteoarthritis?

Both conditions share many similarities, including stiff, painful joints with a limited range of motion. Many people experience warmth and tenderness and report that their symptoms are worse in the morning. My osteoarthritis is worsening simply because I am aging and active. Osteoarthritis, like mine, is primarily caused by movement and the joint experiencing normal wear and tear. Simply put, it is joint mechanics; over time, our joints wear down. Osteoarthritis takes many years to develop, while inflammatory arthritis can arise relatively quickly. The body mistakes healthy tissues for germs or pathogens in this disease, resulting in a wrongful immune response.

Osteoarthritis results from physical use of the joints. Inflammatory arthritis, on the other hand, is very different from osteoarthritis, as it is a chronic autoimmune disease. While osteoarthritis occurs over time and thus typically affects older adults, inflammatory arthritis can hit at any age, even in childhood. In addition, while your risk of developing osteoarthritis can be impacted by being overweight or obese or from suffering a severe joint injury, inflammatory arthritis tends to run in families and is more common in women. It is possible to experience both conditions during your lifetime.

Like other autoimmune diseases, inflammatory arthritis mistakenly considers the body’s healthy tissues as enemy invaders, so it attacks. The resulting inflammation causes pain, joint stiffness, swelling and redness associated with inflammatory arthritis. Additionally, there is a form of osteoarthritis that is, in fact, inflammatory, and it is called inflammatory osteoarthritis. This condition typically affects middle-aged women, and it causes the joints of the pinkie and middle fingers to become painful and swollen.

What Are the Treatment Options?

Right now, there is no cure for inflammatory arthritis. But, again, early diagnosis and treatment at the disease’s first stages can help prevent serious complications. Following a diagnosis, your doctor may prescribe a set of medication that will help to relieve the pain and swelling. In addition, these prescribed drugs may include ones that will help to calm the immune system. Prescribed drugs may consist of corticosteroids, such as prednisone, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs.

Your doctor may want to surgically replace an affected joint if all other non-surgical treatments have failed in severe cases. Under the guidance of your healthcare team, you will need to find a balance of activity that will maintain your overall health, along with rest, which may reduce those painful flare-ups.