What Causes Arthritis?

No longer considered just a consequence of aging, arthritis is the inflammation of one or more joints that results in pain, swelling and limited movement. Arthritis involves the breakdown of cartilage which normally protects the joints and allows for smooth movement. Without it, bones rub together and discomfort results.

There are over 100 different types of arthritis, and about 37 million Americans of all ages suffer from some form. Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type and the one most likely to occur with aging. While it can affect any of the joints, it is most common in the hips, knees and fingers.

Risk factors include being overweight, a previous injury to the affected joint and using the affected joint in a repetitive action. Genetic defects, musculoskeletal defects and injury are uncontrollable factors that can cause arthritis, too.

But there are actions you can take to avoid OA and protect your joints:

✦ Maintain your ideal weight.
✦ Move! Build muscles! Exercise strengthens the muscles and in doing so protects the bones. Strong muscles keep joints from rubbing together and wearing down the cartilage. Low-impact aerobic exercise and range of motion exercises for flexibility are important, too.
✦ Practice good posture to protect neck, back, hip and knees.
✦ Pace yourself. Take breaks when engaging in heavy activity.
✦ Listen to your body. Do not ignore pain.

May Is Arthritis Month

Prayer: Loving God, as I go about my day, help me remain aware of my movements. Keep me mindful as I protect my body against strain and stress. Amen.

Managing Arthritis Pain

While at age 65, about half the people suffer from arthritis, by age 85, virtually everyone does. Inflammation and damage to the joints are painful conditions. More subtle but still painful aspects of the disease are depression, fatigue and stress. These can result in a cycle that makes pain management difficult.

But if you think of pain as a signal rather than just an ordeal, you are more likely to take positive action when it happens. Here are some ways to help you manage arthritis pain:

✦ Heat and cold therapy may reduce the stiffness of arthritis.
✦ Massage warms and relaxes the pained area.
✦ Practicing relaxation can help you gain a sense of control and well being. Prayer, meditation and breathing exercises are ways to bring you to a more relaxed state.
✦ Consider surgery. Regardless of your age, it can improve your life remarkably and is always worth weighing as an option.
✦ Learn more about the differences in the way men and women relate to pain, and make this information work to help you. For example, male and female bodies absorb, store, break down and excrete drugs in different ways. Also, women report lower pain thresholds while men don’t want to report their pain even though it exists.
✦ Build your life around wellness not sickness. This means having a sense of humor, eating right, exercising regularly, enjoying time with your friends and family and being committed to following a treatment plan.

• advocatehealth.com
• arthritis.org -- Arthritis Foundation
• arthritis.about.com
• cdc.gov/arthritis
• Email info.gc@arthritis.org to find out about events and programs specific to Greater Chicago.