TAKING CARE OF YOUR KNEES - AN OWNER’S MANUAL

THE KNEE—A MECHANICAL MARVEL

The human knee is a mechanical marvel. The largest weight bearing joint in the body, it is a moving, mechanical shock absorber. Our knees enable us to walk, run, bend, pivot, straighten, kneel, hop, skip and jump. They help us to lift, balance, even to rise from a chair. When knees work well, we are unaware of them and their impact on our daily lives. When knees are painful, we begin to realize just how essential they are.

KNEE DAMAGE

Knees can suffer from wear and tear over the years. They can accumulate damage from injuries and vigorous activities - sports, dancing, skiing, and heavy labor. They can also be the targets of disease, most commonly osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. If your knees have become painful, it’s time to see your rheumatologist. If they are swollen, red, or warm to the touch, call for an appointment right away. Many different forms of arthritis can affect the knee (e.g., Lyme arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, osteoarthritis). In order to be effective, treatment needs to be based on an appropriate diagnosis. Through physical exam, X-rays, and, sometimes, laboratory studies, we will evaluate your knees and develop an appropriate plan of care. This may include the following:

Medications: A number of medications may help knee pain. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is a good pain medicine. Capsaicin, a topical ointment, can also help with pain relief. Often, however, there is inflammation within the joint, which can accelerate damage to cartilage and bone. Suppressing that inflammation with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication can reduce the pain of arthritis and help you to remain active.

Physical therapy: Exercise, when done correctly, is a safe, easy and reliable way to reduce the pain in your knees. Pain causes disuse and further weakening of the muscle that support the knee. Weaker muscles mean more pressure and strain on the knee joint itself. A carefully tailored program of easy knee strengthening exercises that you can do at home will help you to feel better and to move better.

For those of you who also do exercises for cardiovascular fitness, be sure you choose those exercises that will not further stress or damage to your knees. For example, walking is much kinder to knees than jogging. Jogging delivers a shock to the knee equal to three and one-half times your body weight each time your foot hits the ground. Water exercise is excellent. A stationary exercise bike set with little or no tension, and with the seat as high as comfortably possible, can burn calories without knee strain.

Weight control: If you are overweight, losing those extra pounds will help prevent arthritic damage and help relieve knee pain by reducing the stress you place on your knees. If you know you need to lose weight, ask your family doctor for help in setting up a weight loss program. Your knees will thank you.
Joint injections: When inflammation is severe and does not improve with oral medications, we sometimes inject the knee joint with cortisone, a potent anti-inflammatory medication. Side effects are rare and the benefits are usually impressive and long-lasting. We may also recommend a series of injections of a substance called hyaluronic acid (e.g. Synvisc, Hyalgan), which can provide pain relief for 6 - 12 months in osteoarthritic knees.

Joint protection: Certain joints benefit from added support. A cane or knee brace can help to relieve pressure on the knee, protecting the joint from excessive stress and providing you with extra pain relief.

Even though the knees are a "mechanical marvel", they need our help to remain strong and fully functional. Learn now what you need to do to protect these vital joints!