How Cryotherapy and Contrast Therapy Can Help Arthritis

Over 20 million Americans suffer from arthritis and arthritis-related disability. But what is arthritis? And how can we protect ourselves? Here are some tips.

"Arth" refers to joints, the places where bones meet and typically move. "Itis" refers to inflammation. "Arthritis" means inflammation of joints. There are two main categories of arthritis: Systemic, which includes rheumatoid arthritis; and "wear-and-tear" or osteoarthritis. Systemic arthritis is often an autoimmune disorder with the body attacking tissues surrounding the joints. Osteoarthritis is the result of microtrauma (daily wear that adds up over the years) and macrotrauma (such as falls, car accidents, and sports injuries).

Since inflammation is implicated in both major types of arthritis, it's no wonder Americans consume massive quantities of anti-inflammatory medications. Unfortunately, long-term use of these medications can have serious adverse consequences on the liver, kidneys, and stomach. Cryotherapy is a safe and effective alternative for most people. Cryotherapy refers to the cooling effects of ice and cold water. Ice can literally cool an inflamed area, slowing nerve conduction velocities and thus decreasing pain without negative side effects. Ice will not "fix" an arthritic joint, nor will it slow the progression of arthritis; but until you can make it to the chiropractor, it's a good option for freshly inflamed areas. [WARNING: Overcooling an area can cause the body to actually increase inflammation! Generally 5-10 minutes of icing is safe for most people.]

Contrast therapy is another safe and effective means of self-care. Contrast therapy is the use of ice to combat inflammation, followed immediately by heat, followed again by ice. This method acts like a pump, literally pumping nutrition to stiff joints while retaining the anti-inflammatory effects of cryotherapy.

When should you use heat? Ice? Both? Doctors of chiropractic are uniquely trained in non-drug, non-surgical methods to assist your body's innate healing potential. In addition to asking about ice and heat, you should also ask your chiropractor about spinal manipulation or spinal adjustments. A chiropractor is trained to help joints move properly, something no pill or hot/cold pack can accomplish. Spinal manipulation and joint mobilization are primary tools for reducing symptoms from arthritic changes, as well as reducing progression of the disease. Furthermore, motion blocks pain; and the Arthritis Foundation suggests joint motion to treat or even prevent arthritis. The chiropractic adjustment helps stuck or fixated joints to move more freely, and this literally oils up your body's joints. Your joint linings produce a substance called synovial fluid, and it is one of the most slippery substances known to man. By helping your body wipe this fluid over the joint surfaces, doctors of chiropractic may be able to help you prolong your active years and function at your best.

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