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**Understanding
Osteoarthritis**

What is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis affecting the joints. It is sometimes referred to as a degenerative joint disease.

What causes Osteoarthritis?

The bones in a joint are capped by a layer made of tough and smooth cartilage. Cartilage works like a shock absorber and a lubricant. It helps the joints move past each other smoothly. Over a period, the cartilage wears down, leading to friction in the joint, causing Osteoarthritis.

Some conditions like Rheumatoid Arthritis, Gout, and Psoriatic Arthritis may also cause Arthritis. It most commonly affects the knees, hips, hands, neck, and lower back.

Types of Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis can be classified into two types:

- **Primary Osteoarthritis:** It is considered the most common type of Osteoarthritis that develops in the joints over time. It is usually caused by normal wear and tear from movement as one ages
- **Secondary Osteoarthritis:** It occurs when there is direct damage to one of the joints, multiple times. Injuries and traumas like falls, sports injuries, or accidents could cause secondary Osteoarthritis

Symptoms

- Pain in the joint during movement
- Joint stiffness
- Swelling
- Decreased range of motion of the joint
- Feeling of joint instability

Risk Factors

- Visible joint deformity
- Menopause
- Obesity
- Prior fractures or ligament injuries
- Hereditary
- Autoimmune Diseases

Diagnosis

After a thorough evaluation of the patient's medical history and examination of the joint by an Orthopaedician, imaging tests like X-rays, CT scans, or an MRI may be advised to confirm the diagnosis and further evaluate the joint. A complete blood work-up may be performed to rule out other conditions that cause similar symptoms.

Osteoarthritis, when indicated by an MRI scan, can be graded as follows:

Stage 0: Pre-Osteoarthritis

It is considered the most common type of Osteoarthritis that develops in the joints over time. It is usually caused by normal wear and tear from movement as one ages

Stage 1: Early

It indicates some cartilage damage between the joints but with no significant symptoms. Some patients experience mild pain due to the formation of small bone spurs

Stage 2: Mild

During Stage 2, bone spurs tend to grow and become more painful. The joint space may begin to narrow a little. Enzymes may start to break down the joint cartilage. The pain and stiffness can impair movement

Stage 3: Moderate

Stage 3 is considered moderate and the cartilage between the bones begins to show signs of wear and tear. Joint space becomes visibly narrower. Bone spurs may enlarge and the swelling in the joints becomes evident

Stage 4: Severe

By this stage, the cartilage between the joints starts to disappear or completely disappears. The joint space is much less and lesser synovial fluid is present to lubricate the joint. The bone spurs are much larger. Movement of the joint is extremely restricted due to pain, inflammation, swelling and joint stiffness

Treatment

Various joint saving and cartilage restoration modalities are now available as treatment options. However, they are useful only in a very early stage of arthritis, that is when the cartilage damage is localised. In later stages, these modalities may not work well, though there are other options to manage the symptoms such as:

◦ Anti-inflammatory medications:

Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) can help reduce pain and inflammation

◦ Physiotherapy:

A Physiotherapist can guide the patient through exercises to strengthen the muscles around the joints, improving flexibility of the joint and increasing its range of motion

◦ Supportive devices:

Wearing shoe inserts or a brace can support and stabilise the joints. Using a cane or walker can take pressure off the affected joints and assist in safe movement

◦ Heat and Cold Therapies:

Applying heat or cold packs to the affected joints might help relieve pain and stiffness. A physician will guide the frequency and duration of application of a heating pad, ice pack or cool compress

◦ Surgery:

Surgical intervention usually includes invasive procedures like a joint replacement or an Arthroplasty to facilitate better quality of life with reduced pain and enhanced mobility

When to Seek Medical Attention

If one starts experiencing any change in their joints or if there is pain during movement, they should consult an Orthopaedician. Early intervention, lifestyle and dietary changes can help prevent Osteoarthritis. If there are any concerns or questions, do not hesitate to seek advice from a healthcare expert.