

## A joint attack on arthritis

It's almost certain that you, someone in your family or a close friend will have some form of arthritis.

Arthritis, of which there are over 100 different types, is Australia's major cause of pain and disability. Arthritis directly impacts around 4 million Australians and impacts indirectly on many millions more.

It's an enormous economic cost burden on the community too – collectively we pay some \$24 billion every year – and the extra hidden social and emotional costs are immeasurable.

Traditionally the first week in April each year is designated as Arthritis Awareness Week; an opportunity to reflect not only on the problem, but also, in a positive way, how we can control the symptoms and enable people with arthritis to lead normal active lives.

This year, in conjunction with Arthritis Australia (the peak patient support organisation), the Pharmaceutical Society has developed information and materials to help ensure arthritis can be managed effectively.

These materials include three fact cards on the most common forms of arthritis – osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and gout.

Osteoarthritis (OA) mainly affects the weight bearing joints: the legs, the shoulders, the knees and the lower spine. Often the hands are also affected, especially at the base of the thumb and the end joints of the fingers.

Presently there is no cure of OA, so all treatment is aimed at achieving symptom control. Effective management of OA involves a combination of strategies: joint protection and energy conservation, periods of both rest and exercise, physical aids, medication – both oral and injectable and, usually as a last resort, surgery.

In so far as medicines are concerned, as the primary aim of treatment is to reduce pain, simple pain relievers are the first choice for OA; and paracetamol is the best option.

For optimum results paracetamol should be taken not just now and again but routinely – 3g to 4g per day. This can be either two 500mg tablets up to four times daily, or two of the higher strength (Panadol Osteo) three times daily.

As with all chronic conditions, particularly when conventional therapies are less than perfect in every case, there is plenty of interest in alternative or complementary treatments.

There is some evidence from clinical trials that glucosamine sulphate (1500mg/day) decreases the pain associated with OA of the knee joint. There may be benefit for other joints as well. It is usually necessary to persist with glucosamine treatment for three months before any significant benefit is noticed. However, it should be noted that results from later studies have not been universally supportive of the early trials.

And if you choose to take glucosamine tell your pharmacist first if you have any allergies or if you are taking any other medicines.

Gout is the only form of arthritis where it is likely that some foods can aggravate the condition, but there is evidence that some foods will actually help other forms of arthritis.

Specifically, the beneficial foods are those rich in what we know as omega-3 fatty acids, and the best sources of the omega-3 are oily fish. Olive oils and oils and spreads from flaxseed, canola and wheat germ are also beneficial.

The omega-3 fatty acids have anti-inflammatory effects and can reduce the joint pain and stiffness associated with rheumatoid arthritis.

The arthritis fact cards are available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's (PSA) Self Care health information. Check out the PSA website at [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder. There are also a few other fact cards with helpful advice for sufferers of arthritis. These include *Pain Relievers*, *Preventing Falls*, *Relaxation Techniques* and *Weight and Health*.