What Can Be Done to Help Joint Pain?

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How to Cope With MS Joint Pain

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, 55% of people with multiple sclerosis (MS) have experienced clinically significant pain at some time. This is a high percentage and it's frightening to think of so many people in pain because of this condition.

There are different types of pain, too, with different causes. Neuropathic pain is caused by MS itself, due to nerve damage and demyelination, and can present in many different ways. We experience weird sensations such as stabbing pains, pins and needles, MS tingling and numbing sensations, and all these strange occurrences can be difficult to describe to someone without MS.

What You Need to Know About MS Joint Pain

We can also experience pain in our joints, but this is not directly caused by MS. Conditions such as osteoarthritis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or fibromyalgia can all cause a degeneration of the cartilage or inflammation in the joints, but MS does not cause this.

However, joint pain is very common among people with MS, specifically in the knees and hips, but this is usually caused by bad posture and compensating for bits of us that don't work the way they should.

The way a person with MS walks (their gait) can be affected by the following:

- Spasticity (leg muscles)
- Lack of coordination
- Fatigue
- Poor balance
- Numbness or tingling in the feet
- Foot drop
- Muscle weakness

Also, if you use a cane or a walker it can cause your gait to be off, and any disturbances in the way we walk can make our joints sore since they are not working the way they were made to.

What Can We Do to Improve Our Gait?

The good news is there is a lot we can do to improve our gait and reduce the associated joint pain. Lots of research suggests that resistance training in the gym can help improve things after just eight weeks.

Pilates

I do Pilates classes at home to help correct some of the bad habits I have gotten into since my mobility took a nosedive five years ago.

My teacher looked at me hobbling down the corridor and noticed my right leg turns inwards as I am walking. I also hold my chin up at a funny angle, which is, bizarrely, linked to my foot drop. As a result of these habits, I have pain in my knees, particularly my right one.

My teacher explained that everything is connected to our core strength. Lack of strength in our core, or stomach muscles, makes all movements more difficult. My raised chin, for example, is my way of forcing my feet to lift, but by doing this I am bypassing my core, so improving this area should correct it.

She also has me sit with a ball between my knees while doing seated exercises. This will help correct my knee turning inwards as I walk, and after just a few classes I noticed a difference.

I noticed, for example, that when I stand up I am not taking all the strain in my knees anymore, but use my core to take my weight. Breathing is also important; my teacher taught me to use an “out” breath to engage my core muscles, so I breath out as I stand and take the weight in my tummy.

Yoga

There is lots of anecdotal evidence that yoga can improve gait and associated joint pain. It is a safe, gentle exercise and some studies have found it to be beneficial.

Physiotherapy

Ask your doctor for a referral to a specialist MS physiotherapist. I went to one when I started using a walking stick and the therapist taught me how to use it correctly to minimize trauma to my hips and knees.

They can also recommend splints to correct foot drop as well as explore which type of walking aid is the best for you.

MS Joint Pain as a Side Effect

Sometimes medication can cause joint pain as a side effect, so it is important to consider this too. If you are using interferon-based disease-modifying therapies (DMTs) like Avonex or Rebif, joint pain is a common side effect, particularly just after you take it.

Make a note of when the pain is worse and if it is across your whole body rather than just in your knees and hips. If it is and it is worse 24 to 48 hours after injecting, it is likely to be the medication — anti-inflammatories should help.

So, as usual, it would seem that gentle exercise can help joint pain, but I realize Pilates or yoga can be a daunting prospect, especially if you find it difficult to get down on the floor and up again.

There are plenty of exercises that can be done sitting down though! Good luck.