

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

JOINT PAIN IS NOT ALWAYS ARTHRITIS!

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I gave a talk recently called “Shoulder Pain, it probably isn’t Arthritis”. The purpose here is not to repeat the talk, but to say that in the shoulder joint pain is almost always not from arthritis.

True arthritis in the shoulder is much more uncommon than the knee. There are many other reasons why shoulders hurt.

So the terms joint pain and arthritis should not be used interchangeably.

Most patients are confused by this.

Allow me to demystify if I can.

True arthritis is a disease of the joint in which the joint surface is breaking down and degenerating. I’m referring to inside the joint where the ball and socket joint surfaces come in contact.

Inside the joint the bones are covered by a cap of tissue to keep the bones from coming in contact. You might want to consider the joint surface covering like tread on a tire.

There are many conditions that make your joints feel like “arthritis”. The joint and surrounding tissue aches, feels stiff and may prevent the easiest activities. You’ve got arthritis, right?

Maybe not.

If it is arthritis we probably would see swelling, tenderness and pain with movement of the joint.

Of course as I have said before, the basis of all diagnosis in our work is careful history, physical exam and plain x-rays of the affected area.

Periarticular refers to the area surrounding the joint.

Periarticular pain causes limited function of a joint, but is coming from a problem in the surrounding muscles, bursa (the fluid like sac located in tissue between tendons) and tendons around the joint. Tendinitis is caused by tendon inflammation and damage due to repetitive motion or overuse such as exercising. Bursitis is inflammation of the bursa.

Tendinitis and bursitis mimic arthritis yet these conditions are not joint problems, but due to inflammation near the joint.

Conditions also confused with arthritis include glandular problems such as thyroid disease, adrenal disease and viral infections.

Thyroid conditions, under activity or over activity may lead to a variety of muscle or joint related symptoms.

Both thyroid conditions are known to cause disease that affects the skeletal muscles. Symptoms can include general muscle weakness and pain, achiness and stiffness, trouble climbing stairs, holding or gripping objects and difficulty raising your arms above your head.

Painful joints may also rarely be a sign of cancer. It is always on the list of possibilities especially in someone with fever and weight loss.

Pain in the joints also may be a sign of fibromyalgia, an often misunderstood and unrecognized condition causing widespread muscle pain and tenderness that seems to come and go and move about the body.

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Dr. Haverbush