

Joint pain

by Gaétan Filion, physiatrist

Almost a third of patients at any given clinic will complain of motor difficulties: pain or problems in the joints associated with body movement. How much of this can we attribute to aging, and how much do HIV and antiretroviral therapies (ARVs) contribute to these problems?

Our joints are designed to make efficient use of human energy and enhance durability. However, they have certain mechanical limitations.

Managing your joint account

Banking provides a good analogy for why these limitations occur. No two people have the same amount in their bank account (family history), and depending on the type of work they do or lifestyle they lead, people withdraw different amounts from this account. Sports and vigorous weight training (automatic withdrawals) along with potential accidents (credit lines or cards) can quickly put the account in the red (pain or loss of function). Additional deposits can be made (maintenance of good muscle tone), but their impact on the final balance will be limited.

HIV is a chronic infection that causes an immune response that can manifest in many different ways, including as joint pain. As well, many of the treatments for HIV contribute to joint pain. To identify what's causing your particular problem, your doctor will ask about your family history, work, daily life, sports routines and any recent changes (lifestyle, new infections or medications) or accidents. Some accidents don't have immediate consequences on your joints but can lead to pain over time. Take the time to review what could have contributed to the appearance of symptoms.

Causes of joint pain

Wear and tear

Joint problems fall into a few different categories. Arthrosis is a degradation of cartilage in the joints, and occurs more often as we get older. But age is relative. Someone who does hard physical work or has a history of serious accidents may develop signs of arthrosis at a younger age. If you experience a loss of feeling in your arm or leg, it means you've lost some of the protective mechanism in your joint, which may lead to the development of arthrosis. There are no studies showing an increase in arthrosis among people living with HIV.

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Inflammation

Arthritis is an inflammation of the bones, joints and tendons that can occur at any age. Joint pain can also be caused by fragility around the joint, such as tendonitis (inflammation of the tendon), tenosynovitis (inflammation of the sheath that surrounds a tendon) or fasciitis (inflammation of the connective tissue that binds together muscles or organs). Fragility around the joints is more common in people living with HIV.

Joint pain associated with inflammation affects between 12% and 45% of people living with HIV. There's also an association between joint pain and the presence of a new infection.

Medications

Some ARVs are known to produce joint pain in some people. When you switch from one medication to another, be sure to tell your doctor if joint pain occurs. Be reassured, however, that while they're uncomfortable, these joint pains aren't known to have long-term consequences.

There's no single answer to what may be causing joint pain, but rather a list of factors that should be considered in evaluating its occurrence. Your doctor can help sort through the different variables to better identify the cause and find measures to offer you relief. **R**