Alice,

What is arthritis? Is it a deterioration of cartilage?

— Wondering

**Answer**

Dear Wondering,

Arthritis is a term used to describe any disorder that results in the inflammation of a joint, which may be characterized by pain, swelling, stiffness, and redness. As you asked, this inflammation may involve cartilage of the joint, but not always. Although many forms of arthritis involve a deterioration of the cartilage, it’s worthwhile to note that cartilage problems don’t automatically imply arthritis. There are other conditions that may be involved in cartilage deterioration, such as sports or traumatic injuries and genetic conditions.

Arthritis affects more than 54 million people in the United States alone so rest assured there’s joint support for joint support. This is partially due to the fact that arthritis literally means “joint inflammation” and therefore, it isn’t a single disorder, but rather an umbrella term for any joint disease. Arthritis may involve one joint or many, including knees, wrists, fingers, and even the spinal column. Some diseases that involve arthritis also affect other parts of the body, such as the kidneys, eyes, heart, and lungs. Due to this, other symptoms may occur alongside arthritis, such as rash, dry eyes, fever, fatigue, night sweats, or breathing problems.

Symptoms of arthritis vary in severity from a mild ache and stiffness to severe pain. Depending on the cause of the arthritis, symptoms may develop suddenly or gradually over time. Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, is an example of a degenerative arthritis or one that occurs over time. It results from wear and tear on the joints, typically evolves in middle age, and most commonly troubles older people. In response to your second question, osteoarthritis is an instance where cartilage breakdown and damage between bones is characteristic of the disorder.

Rheumatoid arthritis is the second most common (and the most severe) type of inflammatory
joint disease. Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease, which means people with the condition produce white blood cells (the cells that protect the body from bacteria, viruses, and other invaders) that attack their own healthy cells and tissue. In the case of rheumatoid arthritis, the body's immune system damages joints and the surrounding soft tissue. This type of arthritis is an example where you might have other, more systemic symptoms in addition to joint pain. This could include weight loss, fever, and fatigue.

Looking at this from a macro perspective, there are over 100 types of arthritis, including juvenile idiopathic arthritis, lupus, fibromyalgia, infectious arthritis, and gout. And the causes are even more diverse and broad, including skin and intestinal disorders, bacterial infections, and severe inflammation. Although still somewhat unclear, researchers and experts believe that arthritis is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Often times, people have a genetic predisposition to arthritis and something in their environment triggers it. At this time, it's unclear how to prevent arthritis, although onset of arthritis may be delayed by reducing risk factors, such as by being physically active, not smoking, and by being mindful of excess weight. Depending on the type of arthritis, treatments may include antibiotics, anti-inflammatory drugs, changes in diet, bed rest or alternatively physical activity. For instance, increasing physical activity in patients with osteoarthritis has been shown to improve joint pain and increase joint mobility. In more severe cases of arthritis, splints or surgery may be helpful. For more information, check out the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) Information Clearinghouse.

Here's hoping your ache for more knowledge was soothed!

Alice!

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