

Osteonecrosis Explanation and Treatment

Easily one of the most gruesome sounding of all diseases affecting the human body, the term "osteonecrosis", when literally translated, means "death of the bone." And, it's a term that pretty much sums up the effects of the disease.

Osteonecrosis is a form of arthritis in which the bone loses its blood supply from the body. Without the essential supply of blood, the bone breaks down and eventually disintegrates. This process of breaking down is called "vascular necrosis". At the onset of osteonecrosis, the afflicted bones become soft and porous. The bones may be brittle, and will break easily. Obviously, osteonecrosis is one of the most serious forms of arthritis, and the results can be quite debilitating.

How Does Osteonecrosis Affect the Body?

The condition most often strikes the joints in the hip, knee, and ankle areas. The majority of osteonecrosis patients, or about ninety percent, are affected in the hip area. However, the disease can also strike more than one joint at one time. Unlike other forms of arthritis, osteonecrosis can afflict patients at a very early age. The average age of onset is about thirty-eight years, much lower than some other forms of arthritis. A form of osteonecrosis called Legg-Calve-Perth's disease can develop in young children and teenagers. This form of the disease tends to manifest in the hip or femur, rather than in other areas. If Legg-Calve-Perth's disease is not treated aggressively in the early stages of the disease, the femur head will usually attempt to heal on its own, but can heal in a collapsed position that causes pain and stiffness.

What Causes Osteonecrosis?

Most instances of osteonecrosis occur after the joint has suffered from some sort of injury or trauma. When the joint has been fractured, the blood supply may encounter a blockage. This, in turn, brings about the onset of osteonecrosis. Studies suggest that those who have suffered hip injuries may be at greater risk of developing the disease. Some reports say that about twenty per cent of those who have suffered from some type of hip injury will develop osteonecrosis. Minor traumas, however, do not usually cause the condition.

How Can Osteonecrosis be Prevented?

Because the condition is usually the result of past injury or trauma, avoiding injury (particularly hip injury) is the best form of prevention.

What Are the Signs of Osteonecrosis?

One of the first symptoms that most people experience is an achy feeling, or a sensation of generalized pain in the area of the affected joints. Some patients find it difficult to pinpoint the precise location of the pain, and are unable to describe exactly where the pain originates. For example, many people who suffer from osteonecrosis in the hips will report feeling pain in their groin area.

How is Osteonecrosis Treated?

There are several treatment options available, each dependant upon individual circumstances. Doctors will often prescribe corticosteroids to fight the inflammation. These drugs are only to be taken for short terms, as dangerous side effects can occur when taking corticosteroids over extended periods. Your doctor will determine whether these drugs are an appropriate treatment option. Other medications may be given, usually in conjunction with alternative treatment options. Dietary changes, special exercise routines and, in severe cases, surgical intervention are all viable treatments. The use of special devices such as walkers and crutches can also be used to help patients deal with the effects of this bizarre condition.

As final a fate as the name suggests, osteonecrosis does not mean an end to your active lifestyle. If you feel that you may be at risk of developing the condition, see your doctor. Early detection makes all the difference to finding an effective treatment program.