

09/05/2010 W/S 4

Injecting away joint pain

There are treatments available for patients who suffer from osteoarthritis, writes **KASMIAH MUSTAPHA**



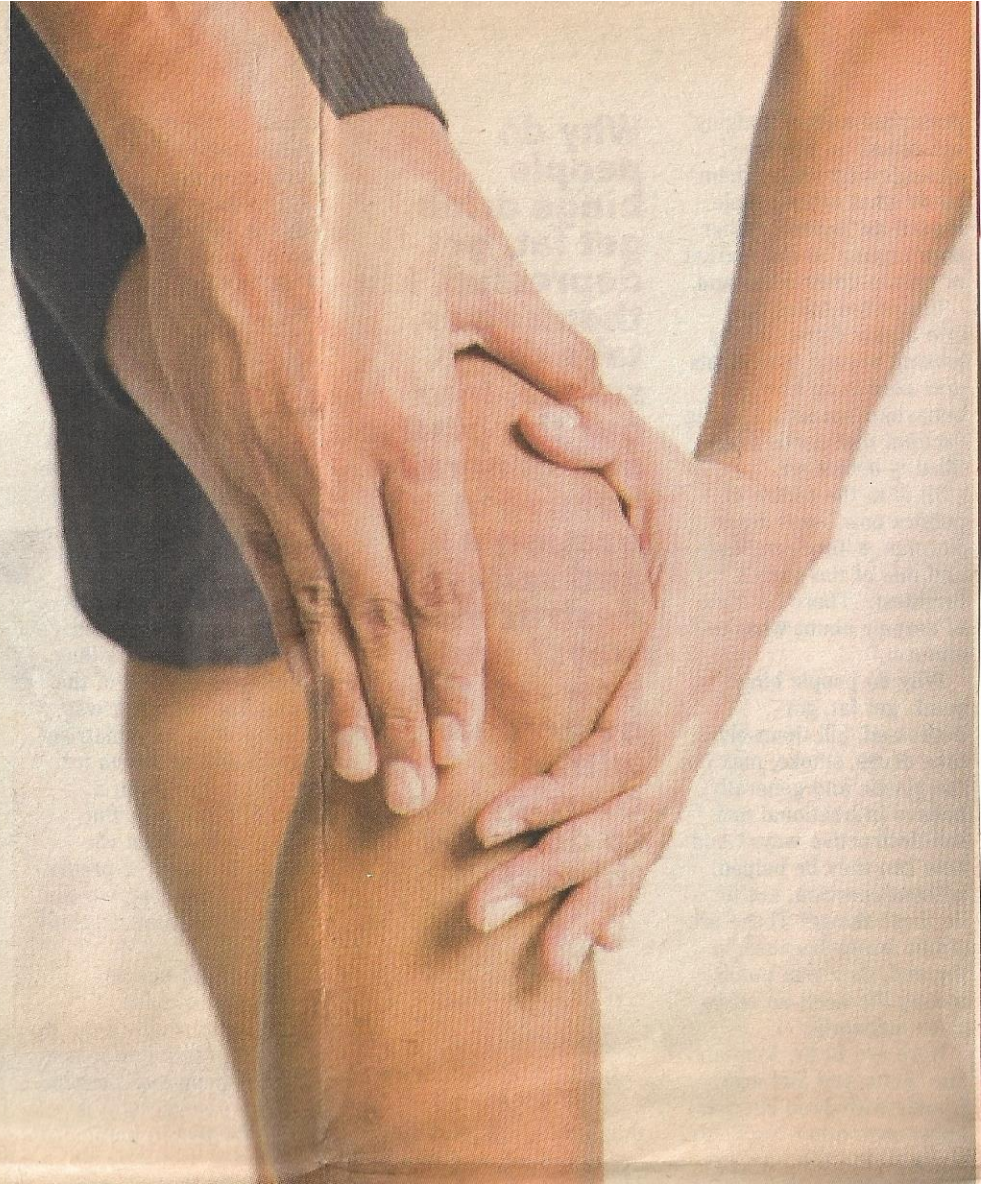
The viscosupplementation treatment works for Fong



The treatment helps lessen the pain, says Dr Selvakumar



Obesity is one of the common causes for osteoarthritis, says Dr Malik



FONG Wai Hoong had always led an active lifestyle. He would exercise daily and his interests included rock climbing, jungle trekking and mountain hiking. Nothing could stop the 40-year-old from taking part in outdoor activities.

That was until two years ago, when he started having problems with his knees. He had to put a stop to all his favourite pastimes as he could hardly walk, let alone do anything more.

"The pain was excruciating. It was especially painful when I had to climb the stairs. My friends told me to take vitamins and supplements to treat the pain but that didn't help at all," he says.

He finally went to a specialist who diagnosed him with mild osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis due to damage in the cartilage or connecting tissues of the knee joints. The damage causes the synovial fluid that lubricates the joints and cushions the movement by absorbing shock started depleting.

According to Malaysian Orthopedic Association president Dr Abdul Malik Hussein, the hyaluronan

acid in the synovial fluid becomes thinner and loses its elasticity in those who suffer from osteoarthritis. As a result, there is a lack of support in the joints during activities like walking.

Dr Malik says early symptoms of osteoarthritis include pain, joint stiffness, loss of the knee function and joint swelling.

"Hyaluronan acts as a lubricator and shock absorber. It also facilitates joint movement. As the fluid dries up, the knee joints will rub against each other during movement and this brings on the pain.

"In a normal knee joint, the synovial fluid absorbs this friction, so we don't feel any stiffness or pain."

In Malaysia, a study found that 9.3 per cent of adults have complained of knee pain. Of these, 23 per cent are over 55 years and 39 per cent are over 65.

Osteoarthritis usually affects people in the 40s and 50s. Typically, men would suffer from it more often than women before the age of 40 due to injury. On the other hand, more women than men aged 40 to 70, suffer from this condition. After 70, the figures are more balanced.

There are many factors that contribute to

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— Dr Abdul Malik Hussein

osteoarthritis. These include obesity, excessive wear on the joints, ageing and injury from sports and accidents.

Dr Malik says symptoms can severely restrict the patient's physical activity and the loss of mobility may cause distress.

Treatment includes educating the patient about the disease, alleviating pain, maintaining or anti-

inflammation, improving the joint function and minimising disease progression.

"Osteoarthritis cannot be cured. The main objective is to reduce and relieve the pain, minimise disability and restore function so patients can walk without pain. We would also educate them about the disease and therapy.

"There are several treatment options, including simple analgesics, steroids, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, viscosupplementation treatment and, as the last resort, knee replacement surgery."

He recommends regular low impact exercises such as swimming, cycling and simple stretching to ease the pain. People who are obese should also make the effort to lose weight as part of the regime to lead an osteoarthritis-free life.

Surgery may not be advisable if the patient has a heart condition, diabetes

or is obese. Instead, viscosupplementation treatment is advised.

Hospital Serdang's consultant orthopaedic and spine surgeon Datuk Dr K Selvakumar says the viscosupplementation treatment involves injecting hyaluronic acid into the knee to lubricate the joints and easing the pain.

"Hyaluronic acid works like a temporary replacement for synovial fluid and helps lessen the pain. Controlled clinical trials have demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing osteoarthritis knee pain and improving mobility."

He was speaking at the launch of Synvisc-One for the treatment of osteoarthritis. When Synvisc-One is injected into the knee, it is said to help lubricate the joint and act as a cushion. With a single dose, patients can be free of pain for up to six months.

Dr Selvakumar says

treatment with synovial fluid replacement has been found to provide similar functions as healthy joint fluid and extended intra-articular residence. First introduced in 1992, this treatment is said to have been given to more than seven million patients worldwide.

The treatment is said to delay or avoid progression to more invasive treatments such as total knee replacement surgery. It is also safer than painkillers because long-term drug use can raise other health issues such as renal complication.

Meanwhile, Fong, who has undergone such a treatment, is active once more.

"I was worried at first but with this treatment, I only needed to rest for one month. Now, I am back to mountain hiking."

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