



# BONE OF CONTENTION

Don't ignore that niggling pain or persistent ache: it could be a sign of debilitating arthritis

**Words** Suzanne Walker **Photograph** Torkil Gudnason

Most of us have had niggling pain in a joint, a wrist when we type, a knee when we run. So when Natalie Fuller started getting pain in her right arm, she attributed it to her busy life. But the pain got worse. And worse and worse. After a battery of tests, 18 months ago she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

Fuller is 26 and when the pain started, she never considered arthritis could be the cause. "I never really associated arthritis with young people like me," she says. She is not alone; it is a popular misconception that arthritis is an old person's disease. In fact, the Arthritis Foundation of Australia figures show that in 2004 of the 3.4 million Australians with arthritis, most of them were of working age and around 60 per cent of them women, while chronic arthritis affects four children in 1,000. If current trends continue, one in five Australians will be living with arthritis by 2020.

Arthritis is a term for over 100 medical conditions affecting the musculoskeletal system, specifically joints. Symptoms include pain, stiffness, inflammation and damage to cartilage, the tissue that covers the end of bones. There are five categories of arthritis: inflammatory forms, such as rheumatoid arthritis; osteoarthritis that usually develops as we age; crystal forms, such as gout; infectious forms caused by viruses; and soft tissue rheumatism, where the problem is in the tissue, muscles and tendons around the joint. Osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout and soft tissue disease account for more than 95 per cent of cases in Australia.

Leanne Way, 31, who was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis at age eight, describes her pain on some days as like a red hot poker shoved in a joint from the inside out, other days, like pressing on a bruise. She has periods when it is controlled with minor medication and bad periods called flares. A minor flare may be an increase in symptoms for a week or two, more stiffness, more pain, feeling more unwell. Sometimes it subsides naturally, sometimes medication will help, and sometimes the symptoms increase dramatically and last longer. Way's most recent flare started in 2002 and lasted two years. "Each time I go into a flare it gets worse," she says. "It lasts longer, I never get back as well as I was before."

Arthritis has a major impact on Way's ability to be spontaneous. "If you know there's something you really want to do that is going to be physically draining you have to plan for it," she says. It makes things others take for granted a lot harder. ►

“I can’t ride a bike now for as long as I would like to, I can’t walk for as long as I’d like to. I have trouble scrubbing the bath and the shower.”

As many arthritis sufferers are forced to do, Way recently went from full- to part-time work. In Australia, arthritis is responsible for about 155,000 weeks of work lost each year contributing to a total financial cost in 2004 of \$11 billion. Including suffering and premature death, the estimated annual toll is almost \$20 billion. The World Health

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Organisation bills musculoskeletal disease, including arthritis, as an epidemic. It nominated 2000 to 2010 as the Bone and Joint Decade to focus attention on the issue.

Ben Horgan, chair of the Bone and Joint Decade in Australia and an arthritis sufferer, says lack of awareness means people are not taking advantage of advances in treatments – new medications, physical therapy, awareness that diet and exercise can help. “They’re letting their situation become so bad that they are unable to turn it around. Early intervention is as important for arthritis as it is with something like cancer,” he says. “If a disease like arthritis sets in and starts eating away at your bones ... then there’s nothing that can be done to build those bones back up unless you are willing to have surgery.”

Fuller now manages her condition through a combination of medication, physiotherapy, exercise and vitamins, but initially her diagnosis had an extreme effect. “I didn’t cope for months. I’ve had to deal with the fact that I probably won’t have any more children, I can’t do the things that my son wants me to do with him. I looked at my son one day and saw how miserable he was and how frightened he was. I realised it was time to get on with it. I’ve now taken control and am looking at what I can do. You’ve got to get yourself in that frame of mind where you think ‘I know it’s tough but you’ve just got to do it’ because the alternative is to sit here and let my life pass me by.”

Peter Brooks, a rheumatologist and executive dean of health sciences at the

University of Queensland, says proper diagnosis is critical for arthritis sufferers because treatment depends on what type you have. The most common symptom, pain, is treated with both over-the-counter painkillers and prescription drugs, physiotherapy and massage, and he says natural substances such as goanna oil help for some soft tissue injuries.

Surgery, such as hip or knee replacement, is a treatment for osteoarthritis or severe rheumatic arthritis and is one of the most cost-effective operations we have. An important advance in fighting inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis has been medication targeting TNF alpha, a molecule produced in inflammation. Bone marrow transplantation may also be used in future for inflammatory disease such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Brooks says there are some exciting treatments around the corner: the discovery of other inflammation-causing molecules and drugs to combat them, and new ways of making bone and cartilage. Brooks believes joint replacements will improve significantly in future.

For osteoarthritis sufferers, herbalist Ruth Trickey says the best recent advance in natural treatments are products such as glucosamine, which treat cartilage. Trickey says research shows, if taken over the longer term, it is helpful in restoring cartilage and may delay the need for heavy-duty medication. Natural options to combat inflammation include some herbs and omega-3 essential fatty acids, particularly fish oil. Reducing pro-inflammatory foods, such as sugar, highly refined carbohydrates and animal fat, and increasing anti-inflammatory foods such as fish, fish oil and flaxseed oil also helps. Trickey says the Mediterranean diet can be effective for arthritis sufferers with its high fish, salad and green vegetable content, and low saturated fat. Some people respond well to variations such as gluten-free, or exclusion of foods from the nightshade family, which includes potato, tomato and eggplant, depending on their type of arthritis, she says.

Many types of arthritis, such as osteoarthritis, are preventable through exercise and diet. “Look after yourself,” says Brooks. “Make sure you get exercise and that you are at your ideal body weight

in your 30s and 40s because you won’t get as much arthritis when you are 60.” Should we worry about that niggling ache or pain? Perhaps. “If you’ve got swelling in the joint, if it’s not controlled by simple forms of medications, if it’s interfering with things that you think are reasonable to do, they’re the sorts of things that should make you go and do something about it,” says Brooks. ■

**EXPLAINING ARTHRITIS**



Musician Daniel Johns suffers from reactive arthritis.

**OSTEOARTHRITIS**

Develops when cartilage breaks down, usually as a result of trauma, ageing or failure of the joint to repair itself. Symptoms include stiffness, pain and tenderness in the joints, muscles and ligaments. Risk factors include being overweight, ageing, hereditary factors, joint trauma, stress and possibly hormones.

**RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS**

An auto-immune disease with inflammation within joints that become painful, swollen, stiff and sometimes deformed. Other symptoms include fatigue, interrupted sleep, weight loss, muscle weakness and inflammation of the heart, lungs, eyes, nerves and lymph glands. Significant mortality rate. Greater incidence in women. Cause unknown but genetic, hormonal and environmental factors may play a part.

**REACTIVE ARTHRITIS**

An inflammatory form of arthritis that is usually precipitated by a bowel or urethral infection. It causes inflammation of a limited number of joints but can be very destructive.

**GOUT**

Caused when uric acid crystals are deposited in joints. Symptoms include severe acute joint pain and swelling, typically of the big toe, ankle, knee and elbow.

**SJOGREN'S SYNDROME**

Glands that produce tears, saliva and sweat are attacked by the immune system causing abnormal dryness of the mouth, eyes and/or other mucous membranes. Most common in women aged 40 to 50. Cause unknown.



Kathleen Turner has battled rheumatoid arthritis.

For more information visit [www.arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au) and [challengingarthritis.org](http://challengingarthritis.org)