Orthopaedic Connection

Pain Relief Topically

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Whenever I give a talk to a group about the treatment of arthritis, questions come up about what medication can be applied topically for pain relief. Anyone with arthritis is or should be concerned about the side effects of pills taken to relieve arthritis pain. I think that is why people are interested in relief given by skin applied preparations.

Topical Analgesics

As a group they are referred to as topical analgesics. The number of different ones has exploded in recent years. They are creams, gels, sprays, lotions, sticks and patches.

Apply the preparation to the affected area around the joint and within a short time the pain is supposed to fade away. And it usually does – for a while.

A topical treatment that is working for you is valuable in reducing your needed dosage of oral anti-inflammatory medications as well as lowering the risk of side effects.

Topical analgesics fall into 3 groups of medication.

1. Capsaisin blocks nerve receptors that send pain signals to the brain. The compound Capsaisin is the same thing that makes chili peppers hot.

2. Counterirritants stimulate nerve endings to cause feelings of heat or cold. Counterirritants are the most common topical analgesics. Two typical ones are Mineral Ice and Icy Hot. The menthol or eucalyptus irritates the skin and distracts the patient from joint pain by creating a sensation of warmth or coolness. Muscles are also relaxed which also helps ease pain.

3. Salicylates inhibit prostaglandins that contribute to pain and inflammation. This category contains salicylate salt which is similar to the active ingredient in aspirin. It breaks down inflammatory cells. It is effective but the salicylate can find its way into the blood stream and cause problems for those on blood thinners. Salicylates give pain relief that is nearly immediate and they come in a wide variety of efficacy; high, medium and low. A typical preparation would be Ben Gay.

Not For Everyone

Topical analgesics are not intended for use by all arthritis patients. They work best for people with osteoarthritis where pain is localized to a specific joint.

They are not effective for people with other forms of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis because pain is more generalized and affects multiple joints.

Some can cause severe skin irritation. Don’t use them with a heating pad as it may cause too much absorption. Some contain chemicals that can thin the blood and should be avoided if you are taking a blood thinner.

I hope this information is helpful to you in treating arthritis. See you next week.
My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

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