

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 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.

What are they?

Most people don't understand this I have found.

Topical analgesics fall into 3 groups of medication.

- Capsaicin
- Counterirritants
- Salicylates

Capsaicin blocks nerve receptors that send pain signals to the brain.

Counterirritants stimulate nerve endings to cause feelings of heat or cold.

Salicylates inhibit prostaglandins that contribute to pain and inflammation.

Salicylates give pain relief that is nearly immediate and come in a wide variety of efficacy; high, medium, low.

Not For Everybody

Well, they 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 kinds of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, because pain is more generalized and affects multiple joints.

Some can cause severe skin irritation. Don't use 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.

Distracting Pain

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 sensation of warmth or coolness. Muscles are also relaxed, which also helps ease pain.

Typical Preparation; Mineral Ice

Hot Stuff

The compound Capsaisin is the same thing that makes chili peppers hot.

We're going to get a little technical so hold on. Capsaicin on the skin causes the release of substance P, a nerve transmitter that sends a burning pain signal to the brain. It takes longer for this to work, that is for it to extinguish the pain signals that are transmitted from the arthritis joint.

Typical preparation; Capsin

Fighting Inflammation

This category contains salicylate, a salt similar to the active ingredient in aspirin. It breaks down inflammatory cells. They are effective, but salicylate will find its way into the blood stream and cause problems for those on blood thinners.

Typical preparation; Ben Gay

I hope this information is helpful to you in treating arthritis.

All Orthopaedic Surgery problems can be evaluated by Dr. Haverbush at the Lakeview Community Wellness Center in Lakeview or at the office in Alma at 315 Warwick Dr., Alma, Michigan.

Please call 989-463-6092 for information or to schedule an appointment.

Future Lakeview Community Wellness Center Clinic dates are Friday September 4 and Friday September 18, 2009.

Please don't forget there is a wealth of accurate information about all the Orthopaedic conditions I treat on the office teaching website www.orthopodsurgeon.com. Please log on and check it out.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free functional lives.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush