



Ask the Expert

Find Answers to Your Sport Medicine Questions

Oil Change for my knee?

Q: *I have worked very hard to stay fit throughout my career. Lately, my left knee has started aching after heavy activity. I was assessed, had x-rays and my physician told me I have mild osteoarthritis. She also outlined my treatment options which included viscosupplementation – something she said was like an oil change for my knee. What do you think of this as a treatment option? Active Adult with Osteoarthritis*

A: Dear Active Adult: Viscosupplementation refers to injecting joints with a lubricant called hyaluronic acid (HA). Your joints make several important substances and one of these is HA. HA reduces the friction in joints by coating surfaces that rub together. It also increases the shock absorbing properties of your joint fluids. Over time HA molecules breakdown and for some unknown reason osteoarthritic joints make less HA. Both of these changes make it easier for the affected joint to wear out even faster.

Viscosupplementation has been available for over 30 years and many different products are available in Canada. These products vary in molecular weight, some are derived from rooster comb, some are synthetic but they all work on the same principle – improving the quality of your joint fluids. The joints most commonly injected are the knee, hip, shoulder and ankle.

I have treated patients with HA injections for 20 years and find it works great in some people and it doesn't seem to work in others. We currently have no screening tests to determine if a patient will respond to an HA injection but as a general rule the less arthritic your joint the more likely you will benefit. HA injections only last so long and they can safely be given whenever your symptoms return – whether this is 6 months or 6 years after your last injection. HA injections can cause 2 potential, but infrequent side effects – 1. Infection – puncturing your skin with a sterile needle has a very small risk of infection; 2. Flare– some knees swell and hurt for several days after an HA injection.

The bottom line is that viscosupplementation is very safe and some people find it extremely helpful in terms of reducing or eliminating their pain and allowing them to enjoy an active lifestyle with their knee osteoarthritis. While you may not be a car, with all the demands you have made on your body you might benefit from a 'regular oil change'.

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