

Cartilage's Disappearing Act

What is Cartilage?

Most of us know in some vague way that we have cartilage and it can impact joint health. What is this stuff? What does it do and where does it go as I age? Cartilage is a firm tissue that is soft and flexible. Feel the upper part of your ear or the tip of your nose and you can feel it. Cartilage is made from chondrocytes but does not have any blood vessels to aid in regeneration. Therefore, when you damage or lose cartilage it does not repair itself very well. Cartilage is important to your joints (even your fingers and toes!) because it cushions the joint and allows it to move smoothly.

Why does it get damaged?

As we age, we cause normal wear and tear to our joint cartilage. This wear and tear is caused by usage such as walking and moving but can be more severe and degenerate faster if you play sports or have a traumatic injury/accident.

What are my options if this is causing me pain?

There are treatments for cartilage degeneration and the first step is to see a board-certified orthopedic surgeon for a diagnosis. The surgeon will most likely order an MRI or other test to help see the severity of the cartilage damage. Injections are a non-invasive option. Some people feel they have good results with cortisone, hyaluronic acid, or prp injections.

For more severe cases your surgeon might recommend surgery to repair, clean, or tack down cartilage that is not properly attached. One of the newest treatments available is BioCartilage; this is a micronized cartilage powder that is rehydrated with your own platelets and made into a paste. This paste is smoothed over areas where your cartilage is no longer present (the hole where your cartilage used to be). This paste helps attract and encourage chondrocytes, your own cartilage cells to move in and create a matrix over the top of the defect that mimics your original cartilage and alleviates pain.