

Health

What is bursitis?



Josef Pace

Bursitis describes inflammation in a specific bursa or bursae. A bursa is a structure within the body made up of a small enclosed fluid-filled sac found around muscles, ligaments tendons and bony prominences.

More than 150 bursae can be found within our body and their primary role is to allow smooth gliding of soft tissues such as muscles, ligaments and tendons over each other in an almost friction-free environment.

When a bursa becomes inflamed or irritated due to trauma, movements start getting limited and pain starts to set in. Initially, the condition presents itself through a vague discomfort which does not always cause sufficient limitation necessitating immediate action and attention.

If left unseen to, such problems tend to worsen generating more inflammation, causing more pain with further limitation of movement.

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The most common sites of bursitis are the shoulder, elbow, knee, hip and heel. This is specifically in those areas where bursae lie close to the skin. Bursitis often develops due to some form of mechanical malfunction within our body over a prolonged period of time, leading to a slow progressive onset of irritation of minor concern which eventually leads to inflammation, causing pain.

Typical signs and symptoms of bursitis consist of mild redness over the concerned bursa, along with stiffness in the specific joint the following morning. Significant swelling of the bursa may sometimes be present. This could be a sign of infection rather than just inflammation, in which case immediate medical attention must be sought.

When it comes to treating bursitis, it is very important to establish the presence or absence of

inflammation and infection. Ice, rest and physiotherapy modalities, together with appropriately prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs, normally help in controlling the inflammatory bursae.

If a bursa is infected, this is usually treated by the medical practitioner using antibiotics. Physiotherapy is nonetheless important in both cases to decrease swelling and pain and to maintain specific joint motion.

More often than not, people are unaware of how they developed bursitis and although uncommon, it is possible for bursitis to develop spontaneously for no obvious reason. The presence of this condition in a significant number of hip, shoulder and knee problems is manifest and makes one believe that there is a mechanical component to the development of bursitis.

Taking the shoulder as an example, bursitis often develops just beneath the furthestmost bony tip of our shoulder, known as the acromion, describing a condition referred to as subacromial bursitis.

Such a condition usually develops due to a decreased space in the area which may result from swelling, arthritis or even bad posture. This point needs special emphasis because posture analysis and screening of one's body mechanics is an important consideration that has to be taken seriously to help avoid problems such as the one being described.

Repetitive movements, such as those required by strenuous manual jobs, also predispose to development of shoulder subacromial bursitis which, if taken for granted as a mild shoulder problem simply treated with mild pain killers, will most certainly recur in the form of problems that are potentially more serious.

The emphasis must be on a clear understanding of the problem and addressing it properly with appropriate care. Posture screening and, in this case, shoulder stabilisation exercises will help.

Often bursitis is treated with steroid injections. This intervention helps to remove the swelling, decrease the pain and allow one to return to function.

In severe cases that resist most treatment modalities surgery is considered. This means the bursa is surgically removed thus eliminating the cause of the problem which also means eliminating a component that is important for the mechanical functioning of our body.

This article is intended to inform the reader that noticing the symptoms early and taking prompt action to solve the problem with the help of conservative treatment could possibly avoid the need for interventions in the form of steroid infiltration or surgery.

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Taking care of our body



Maurice Cauchi

Everybody is aware of the old adage that a stitch in time saves nine.

On the other hand, it seems to be an inherent characteristic of human nature that a healthy body is an ignored body. Unlike servicing a car at regular intervals from the very first time you get it, nobody bothers to check on the state of health of our own body, unless one develops some symptom or other.

Unfortunately, most killers within the community arise insidiously, and for a number of years cause no symptoms at all, giving us a false sense of security.

Take for instance high blood pressure – the so-called ‘silent killer’. It starts quietly, with no symptoms at all. It may start early, even at the tender age of 40 and, for a number of years, one is quite unaware of anything going wrong. And then, slowly, years later, one might start getting vague symptoms like headache, and only much later on one might start getting really serious problems like heart failure or even stroke. Such a simple problem to diagnose, yet such a disastrous outcome if ignored!

Cancer is likewise a well-known killer that lingers in the body for years, if not decades, before it manifests itself. During this time, it is growing relentlessly but insidiously, producing no symptoms whatsoever, while we continue to live in a fool's paradise. And yet, several simple tests are available to detect the various kinds of cancer that might affect us.

Perhaps one could start with one of the earliest to get going, namely cancer of the uterine cervix in young women. In the full bloom of life, in their teens even, within a couple of years after their first unprotected sexual experience, a virus might become implanted, which produces a mutation in a cell, priming it to become cancer.

With sexual mores becoming more relaxed in our community, we can expect a mini explosion of this condition. And yet, it is so simple to diagnose: a smear taken early in the piece will determine whether there is any problem. Left alone and a lethal cancer will result.

The same can be said about another very common cancer, namely one that affects the bowel. There are several reasons why this has become so common, but whatever the reason, early signs can often be detected and can prove life-saving. One simple test involves looking for microscopic bleeding in the stools. And yet,

how many people in the bloom of life, when young and vigorous, bother to have such a test, which, again, can be life-saving? Early diagnosis again is the simplest and best way to deal with these problems.

Take yet another relatively common condition, renal disease. The causes of this condition are many, but need not bother us for the time being. The important point is that, in most instances, a ridiculously simple test can tell us whether there is any fundamental problem with kidney function.

The presence of protein (and/or other products) in the urine can be checked by dipping in it a specially prepared dip-stick – a trick a 10-year-old child can easily do and interpret.

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So what is the moral in all this: obviously while this may sound rather simplistic, and while not all serious disease can be diagnosed early through simple tests, it would be advisable to have some rules we might decide to follow to increase our chances of detecting disease early.

A car needs a good service every six months or so, but our body, after 40 or 50 years of good living, when we are on the brink of starting the second half of our existence, would need a visit to a medical practitioner on a yearly basis to check on certain points. A list of these (at the discretion of your general practitioner) would include:

- Examination of the blood pressure. Make sure you understand what this is and what needs to be done if found elevated;
- A urine examination, especially for kidney disease, and to detect diabetes;
- An examination of the stool to rule out any bleeding from any part of the digestive tract;
- A Pap smear (or viral gene analysis if required) to ensure that cervical cancer is detected early;
- A regular breast examination for lumps: cancer of the breast is the commonest cancer in Maltese women.

Obviously, this is not a complete list of diagnostic measures that a GP might feel necessary, but it is a good start. We have not even bothered to mention a number of diseases everybody knows about but which are ignored by most. These include common psycho-social problems resulting in dietary imbalances and overweight, smoking and alcohol overindulgence. Anyone wishing to reduce challenges to health must of course have a good look at one's habits.

One can hope to live a long, good and healthy life only if one ensures that it is also an examined life.