

CHECKUP

Injections relieve arthritis pain without risks of other treatments

By **SANDY ILLIAN BOSCH**
STAFF WRITER

Osteoarthritis doesn't have a cure, nor is there one for the pain, stiffness and lack of mobility it can cause. But a treatment approved for use nearly 10 years ago offers relief to the 10 million Americans who suffer from osteoarthritis of the knee.

"I've injected probably thousands of patients with it," said Dr. Jeffrey Meisles, an orthopedic surgeon at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital and Gottlieb Memorial Hospital in Melrose Park, of Hyalgan, a drug used to treat the pain related to osteoarthritis of the knee. The drug mimics, both in chemical make-up and in function, the hyaluronan normally found in the knee joint but that is lacking in people with osteoarthritis.

"It's like hydrating a sponge," Meisles said of the action Hyalgan, and other forms of hyaluronan, has on the cartilage of the knee. Osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease that causes loss of joint cartilage – the material that acts as a cushion between bones. Without cartilage, a patient can end up with bone rubbing on bone, which causes pain, swelling and lack of movement.

Hyalgan not only increases the function of remaining cartilage, it also safely relieves pain.

"It's really mostly a pain reliever," said Dr. Cory Conniff of Metropolitan Rheumatology Associates in Hinsdale. He uses the injections almost daily to treat his patients.

Hyalgan is injected directly into the knee joint, the joint most frequently affected by osteoarthritis, often with the guidance of ultrasound to ensure accurate placement. Three to five weekly injections are repeated as

often as twice a year for continued relief with little or no side effects.

That's what Meisles likes best about this treatment. Other pain relievers have been proven to cause serious side effects. Cortisone shots are shorter acting than Hyalgan and raise blood sugar in patients with diabetes. Anti-inflammatory drugs can cause gastrointestinal bleeding, and surgery is used only when other treatments have been exhausted.

"With Hyalgan, there are no side effects," Meisles said.

Of course, the drug isn't for everyone. Hyalgan works best on patients with mild to moderate cases after other pain killers and physical therapy have failed. Because the drug is derived from rooster combs, a rich source of hyaluronans, it shouldn't be used in patients who have allergies to eggs or poultry, Meisles said.

Still, Conniff said most people with osteoarthritis of the knee can find relief from Hyalgan. Although the drug has been in clinical use for 18 years and approved for the treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee in the U.S. since 1997, some doctors don't offer it to their patients.

"I'd like to see it used more," Conniff said.

Hyalgan was the first drug of its kind to gain approval by the Food and Drug Administration. Several types of hyaluronan products can now be found on the market for treatment of osteoarthritis.

Hyalgan is approved only for treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee, but Conniff, Meisles and other doctors suspect it could be just as effective in other joints. Studies are under way to find out.

"They look promising," Conniff said.



Dr. Jeffrey Meisles of Orthopedic Specialists in Elmhurst injects a patient's knee with Hyalgan, a drug that helps relieve the pain and lack of mobility caused by osteoarthritis. (Doings photo by Scott Hardesty)