

Mail Today

DETRAYED BY

Osteoarthritis, Stroke, Heart Attack and Parkinson's disease are all conditions associated with old age. But many young people also suffer from these. Lifestyle factors, genes or sheer bad luck are to blame. Here, four people talk about what it feels like to be young and afflicted

OSTEOARTHRITIS AT 23

Two years ago, 25-year-old Varun Kapoor felt a twinge in his knee during a session of football with friends. This was diagnosed as osteoarthritis. He says:

It all started when I was in college. I would feel strange currents of pain in my knee. This was bearable to a point. But after I began working, things changed. My job required me to sit for long periods of time, and that's when the dragon reared its head.

Walking was absolute agony, literally. I couldn't get up without wincing and I felt my knees would buckle from the pain. It took me several minutes to adjust my gait and walk properly. My calves were also swollen and I consulted a general practitioner about my problem. He told me the swelling was a result of high blood pressure, a problem I was already aware I had, since it had been diagnosed earlier.

I think I ignored all the signs deliberately because I did not want to believe that I had osteoarthritis, something I always considered an 'old person's' disease. It was horrible to imagine that I had this, at my age! I knew that one of us four brothers would be struck by this problem as it runs in the family but I was also equally sure it wouldn't be me.

I guess all of us want to believe that we are invincible and that nothing can happen to us. Another friend of mine had exactly the same symptoms and had been diagnosed with osteoarthritis, but I didn't want to accept this was happening to me too. I ignored my problem to the extent of not telling my family about it. This should give you an idea of the degree to which I refused to acknowledge it. One of the worst consequences of my problem was the social rejection I faced. Since I could not walk because of the painful knees, I began putting on weight. My job was a desk based one anyway without any scope for movement. My colleagues and friends began taunting me about my expanding girth. They would use every possible opportunity that arose to pass comments. It felt bad, especially because they were true and hit the mark. I had always been a lean and athletic person and now suddenly I had a big belly! As one needs functional legs to be in any exercise programme, I was left with very few options.

I am relieved I went to the doctor who confirmed that I had osteoarthritis. At the end of the day, I have understood from him that there is a greater chance of managing this ailment better because I am young.

My therapy involves, ironically, exercise, and hot water bag compresses. The doctors have said that I might need surgery on my knees later, but if I follow the physiotherapy routine religiously then I won't need it. I've come to terms with the fact that I have osteoarthritis, and I need to deal with it. But I don't plan to let it stop me from living my life.

Why did Varun get osteoarthritis?

This is the most common form of arthritis, and occurs when the cartilage in the joint wears out. Although osteoarthritis is more common in the elderly, it can also happen to young people like Varun. This may occur due to abnormal wear and tear in joint structures following a fracture, repeated dislocation of the joint, infections, obesity, hyperthyroidism or hereditary factors, as in Varun's case.

Being overweight, old age, joint injury, heredity, and muscle weakness can also increase a person's susceptibility to arthritis. Any joint in the body can be affected, and typically just one joint is impacted. Joints in the hands, hips, knees and spine are common targets and at times several joints can be affected simultaneously. Though there

is no cure for osteoarthritis, treatments can help relieve pain and it can be effectively managed so as not to hamper daily life.

PARKINSON'S AT 35

Narender Rampal was 35 when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Several years later, he is happy that a surgery has now put his life back on track. He says:

I can barely remember when it all started, as the progress of the disease was very gradual. Around the time I was 35, I started experiencing stiffness in the neck and right arm. As it persisted for many weeks, I decided to see an orthopaedic specialist. He advised me to do a few neck exercises. Even though I practiced these exercises religiously, they didn't seem to work. In some weeks I started to feel tremors in my toes. The event that sounded a clarion call for help was when I had an attack of trembling after an argument with my wife. My hands began to quiver, my feet started wobbling and I could scarcely stand upright.

This incident jarred me and my family and I ended up at a neurologist's office. He diagnosed my condition as Parkinson's. I was put on dopamine tablets to counter the brain's inability to produce dopamine which leads to the quivering movements of the body in Parkinson's. Despite the medication, there were times the involuntary movements of my body such as the thrashing of my arms and legs continued. Even when I lay down, my hands and legs would jerk incessantly.

By this time, my life had changed completely. I was dependant on my family for everything. Since I had stopped socialising, my dependency on them was even greater. Six years after I started allopathy, people suggested I try out the Unani form of medicine. I decided to give it a shot, and completely stop allopathy. This period left me motionless. My body wouldn't budge and my eyes were the only form of communication. My family would stay awake all night in turns to watch over me. This period lasted for a year-and-a-half. Despite my hope and patience, Unani medicines didn't help me. Ultimately, I was put back on dopamine pills and recovered my mobility.

In '98, my wife read about a unique surgery for Parkinson's. Since it was new in India then, our doctor asked us to wait for a while till its benefits were confirmed. Three years later in 2001, the operation was performed on me and now I am in better shape than I have ever been. My life is more normal than ever before, and I have no more involuntary body movements to worry about. My speech is still slurred and I am not allowed to drive but I am not dependant on anyone in the way I used to be. The best part is that I go for a long walk every evening now!

Dr Alok Gupta, neurosurgeon, VIMHANS, explains Parkinson's Disease

Today in India, one per cent of the entire population suffers from Parkinson's. The average age of onset for this disease is 60 and is very rare for it to occur in younger age groups. It happens when neurons of the brain die, thereby depriving the brain of the chemical dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that enables communication among brain cells involved in motor control. This is a complex, progressive and degenerative neurological disorder that causes loss of control over body movements, symptoms like stiffness or inflexibility of limbs and joints, slowness or



An erratic lifestyle caused Ajay Sikka's heart attack

absence of movement, involuntary and regular rhythmic shaking of a limb, head, mouth or tongue. The cause of the disease is unknown and there is no cure. The latest research is focused on stem cell transplants to treat the disease and success has been seen in several cases.

TRUE OR FALSE?

YOU can be identified by your tongue print.

TRUE Everyone's tongue shape and texture is different. Scientists are investigating using these prints to identify people rather than fingerprints, which can be forged. Not only is the tongue easily accessible, but it's harder to tamper with.



HEART ATTACK AT 27

A year ago Ajay Sikka almost collapsed after a heart attack. The 28-year-old sales professional has learned the downside of a stressful lifestyle the hard way. He says:

Being in the field of sales, my job involves erratic hours at work and no fixed meal timings. I often skipped food, ate whatever I could get my hands on while on the run and ended up eating junk at odd hours. Worse still, I have been a heavy smoker since

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THEIR BODIES

This young man was just TWENTY SEVEN when he suffered a potentially deadly heart attack. Others even younger have suffered stroke, arthritis and crumbling bones – diseases expected in people twice their age. So how do they cope?

I was 23-years-old. A pack of cigarettes a day was the norm. I was also not the kind to do any form of exercise. Little did I know that this collection of bad habits could almost kill me.

I was getting ready for work one morning when I felt a pain radiating down my left arm. This was accompanied by uneasiness and profuse sweating. My shirt became wet and soggy in a span of a few minutes. Brushing it off as a hot summer day, I changed my shirt just prior to setting out for my office. To my surprise the sweating did not stop and to make matters worse the uneasiness grew. I sensed something was wrong and called my brother, who was in his office, to take me to a hospital.

We rushed to the hospital and I was wheeled into the emergency immediately. An echocardiogram revealed a blockage in my heart. An angioplasty was performed on me instantly to remove the

block. I was in hospital for four days and after a month of bed rest I got back to work. But life has definitely changed since then. Discipline had entered my routine for the first time.

The biggest hurdle was to give up smoking, which was the greatest risk factor according to my doctor. I took about a month-and-a-half to do this, but eventually succeeded in conquering the habit. I have started going slow on oily and deep fried food and have given up red meat entirely. Exercise has become an integral part of my life now – 20 minutes of yoga in the morning and an hour of brisk walking in the evening, after work. In fact I lecture everyone I meet on the importance of exercise and good eating habits to avoid an early heart disease, like in my case. Though I have been advised medication for the next two or three years, I know I need to maintain a balanced lifestyle to avert any further heart problems.

RAHUL IRANI

Dr Praveen Chandra, consultant cardiologist at Max Super-speciality Hospital explains why heart attacks are on the rise among young people:

About two to five per cent of my patients are below the age of 30. The reason more young people are having heart attacks is because of their lifestyle – stressful work-lives and erratic sleep cycles, smoking, drinking alcohol and irregular dietary habits. In Ajay's case his saving grace was the fact that he reached the hospital quickly. He was in the middle of a heart attack when the (ECG) was performed. This was followed by an angiography which revealed a block in the main artery on the left side of his heart, which was removed through an angioplasty. Only 35 minutes elapsed between the time he had the attack and received treatment for it. This is why he is alive today.

STROKE AT 18

19 year old Akshay Khattar suffered a major stroke that left his entire left side paralysed in December last year. But months of physiotherapy and Botox treatments have seen him recover almost 90 per cent of the mobility in his left side. He says:

I was doing my homework – my usual routine in the evenings – when I felt a headache coming on. I thought it might be caused by stress, and decided to close my book and lie down. But the pain suddenly escalated. I really have no clue about what happened after that. My parents told me that I fell suddenly off my chair, and just stopped moving – my left side had been totally paralysed.

My parents called our neighbour who is a neurosurgeon, and he told them to take me to the hospital immediately. This saved my life. I reached the hospital within 3 hours, which is the 'golden period' for stroke victims. After a CAT scan, the doctors gave me drugs to thin the clot in my brain, and I was discharged soon after. What followed were daily physiotherapy sessions, which are still going on. I'm happy to say that I have regained 90 per cent of my mobility, and can walk without support, which is terrific!

My dad has been my greatest support, and I know that I am going to be totally healthy soon. This is not going to affect my life at all. I'm just 19, I have a really long way to go. What is a small stroke in the greater scheme of things?

Akshay's doctor, Dr PN Ranjan, senior consultant neurosurgeon, Apollo Hospitals, explains what happened.

The bad news is that the incidence of strokes in young Indians is almost 40 per cent and is on the rise. A sedentary lifestyle and bad food habits are resulting in more cases of lifestyle diseases like heart attack, stroke and diabetes, and it is high time that youngsters start looking after themselves. In Akshay's case, he suffered from rheumatic heart disease at birth, which caused the clot in his heart. This clot travelled to his brain, causing the stroke. He is recovering very well because he was brought in early. He is very young, so his recovery can be facilitated with botox injections to reduce muscle stiffness, and regular physiotherapy.

Interviews by: Meghanien Dutta Lingam and Rituparna Mukherjee

When to do away with your doctor



1 YOU CAN'T BET ON YOUR DOCTOR'S ABILITY. You visit a doctor because he is considered an expert. If you often feel uneasy about his recommendations, this is an indication that you don't trust him. In such an instance, it is less likely that you will follow his treatment, so it's probably better to find another one.

2 HE FORGETS YOU. If you have visited the doctor several times, and he is unable to recall either your visits or your condition, he's of no use. If he doesn't listen to you either, he is not paying attention to you. What he recommends might not help your condition at all.

3 QUESTIONS ARE NOT WELCOME. You pay a doctor to provide you answers to your health problems. Does your doctor brush aside your questions and tell you that you just need to trust him when you want to know about treatment options? Many doctors discourage questions. If this is your doctor's reaction, let him go. Find another who responds to your queries.

4 DOCTOR IS NOT FORTHCOMING. Are all the diagnostic test results shared with you? Do you know why a test is being ordered or why a specific treatment plan has been chosen over another? You need to be informed about which test is advised for the diagnosis which disease. If you are not, you don't need this doctor.

5 DOCTOR IS UNSYMPATHETIC. If your doctor does not give you a patient ear and is abrupt when you are explaining the problems that arise because of your condition, he is unsympathetic. Even if he has heard the same things several times from other patients, there is no excuse to be in sensitive to your condition.

6 YOUR DOCTOR'S CLINIC IS TOO FAR AWAY. It can be stressful and inconvenient to drive a long distance to see a doctor, especially if your health problems add to the discomfort. Even if your doctor is famous, switch to one closer by.