More Hispanics suffer from arthritis

BY YINED RAMÍREZ-HENDRIZ
SPECIAL/EL NUEVO HERALD

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently revealed that 3.1 million Hispanics in the United States suffer from arthritis, and one out of five reported severe pains in the joints and restricted movement. This is the first report that includes Hispanics as a group and establishes that Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are the most affected.

Twenty two percent of Puerto Ricans reported suffering from the degenerative joint disease, and a very similar percentage of whites, non Hispanic (23 per cent) and African Americans (22 per cent). Cubans and Cuban-Americans reported the smallest frequency with 12 percent, while Mexicans reported the higher number of limitations for work. At present, arthritis is the main cause of disability in the United States.

Juan Suarez, M.D., orthopedist sees this study as a good opportunity to create awareness about arthritis, its management and prevention. After all, it’s estimated that in 40 years Hispanics will become one third of the US population and this tendency could heavily impact public health.

“These findings are important because it is the first time the CDC recognizes Hispanics as population, which historically has been underrepresented and the result is that arthritis has as high or equal frequency in Anglos and African Americans,” said the Puerto Rican surgeon who practices at Cleveland Clinic in Weston.

But the doctor -who trained at the University of Miami- doesn’t underestimate that the problem could be much more serious. “This study has certain limitations. Besides, Hispanics don’t have a high representation in those surveys and another issue could be their lack of medical coverage. The question on the survey was: Have you received a diagnosis of arthritis from a doctor? The incidence could be much higher; the Hispanic population in the US has less medical access”.

Dr. Suarez sees, as part of the solution, “educating primary physicians so they can identify this condition in Hispanics. It’s necessary to treat the arthritis at an early stage so the severe stage that leaves a person disabled, is not reached.”

“When the patient visits his/her primary physician, he/she should feel comfortable enough to let the doctor know they have pain or discomfort. The doctor’s role should be to ask the patient if there´s pain in his/her joints, if the knees are stable or they’re are suffering from inflammation or restriction of movement in the joints. Another signal is noises in the joint. The ends of the bones are covered with cartilage and when arthritis is present, the cartilage wears out, which makes a noise when you move. A good physical exam and an x-ray can determine if the condition is present.”

Even though genetics may influence having arthritis, lifestyles are important for prevention and management. On one side it’s necessary to have a healthy weight, the extra weight adds unnecessary pressure to the joints. It is also important to do low-impact exercise like walk and swim to reduce the pain, improve the function and quality of life and delay the onset of the condition. “Arthritis symptoms can be managed with exercise and anti-inflammatory drugs. This helps the person to function normally even though the condition is present. But this conservative methods won’t have any results if the diagnosis comes late.”
More advanced or severe cases can be treated with cortisone injections which will provide short-time relief, but a more radical treatment would be to replace the knee, shoulder or hip.

The National Alliance for Hispanic Health offers a toll free number where individuals can receive more information and physician referrals, including community centers in their city. For more information call 1-866-783-2645 or www.hispanichealth.org.