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Joint Noises

Sounds often are used to assist a physician in making a diagnosis. The characteristic sounds of the heart or lungs provide clues to determine whether something is wrong.

When joints make noise it can be a sign that something is wrong or it can be normal. Joint sounds can be heard or felt. Unfortunately, acoustical diagnosis of joints is not as well developed as with heart and lung sounds.

Most joints are made of two bones, cartilage on the ends of the bones and the joint capsule.

The joint capsule is analogous to a strong balloon that surrounds the two bones. Imagine the air has been sucked out of the balloon. There is less pressure inside the capsule than out. The negative pressure inside the joint provides additional stability.

Current thinking is that when a joint pops, the pressure inside the joint capsule is changed, much like the noise that occurs when forcing air into a balloon that has been stuck together. The joint can be popped again after the vacuum has had time to re-establish itself.

Cartilage covers the ends of bones where they joint. The cartilage provides a smooth surface for the two bones to glide on, but the cartilage can wear away, become frayed, or loosen. Flecks or strands of loose cartilage can float around in the joint capsule, resulting in a coarse grating sound often described as Rice Krispies.

Each time the joint moves, crunching is heard or felt, as opposed to the one time associated with a vacuum like sound. If pain and swelling are associated with the noise, consultation with a health care professional is indicated

Another source of noise is tendons, which attach muscles to bone and overlie the joint capsule. Tendons rub and snap over bony prominence, making noise. Subtle crinkling can be felt over tendons when they are

stretched, which might be a symptom of inflammation or might be relatively asymptomatic.

If noise is the only sign and there is no pain, swelling, or increased skin temperature, you don't need to worry.

A loud pop or snap that occurs at the same time as an acute injury obviously is a bad sound. A grating, creaking, or popping joint that is swollen, hot and painful obviously indicates a problem. A coarse clicking sound could indicate partial dislocation of the joint, which might lead to degenerative changes later and should be checked.

Joint sounds by themselves are not diagnostic. Sounds with pain should be checked by a health care professional. Sounds without pain should be monitored over time to see whether other symptoms develop.