

As a child

growing up in South Africa, Angela MacRitchie was a talented ballet dancer and gymnast.

But at the age of 19, something happened to her knee that put a stop to her active lifestyle. "It swelled up to a huge size and no one was sure why," said Angela, now aged 48 and living in Glasgow. "I didn't have a specific injury or fall...It was incredibly painful, and I could only walk with the help of crutches."

Angela MacRitchie was told she'd have to take powerful drugs for the rest of her life to manage her crippling knee pain. But she put her trust in a natural approach instead, and is now pain-free and more active than ever

Over the next 20 years, Angela had six operations on her knee in an attempt to locate and solve the problem. But all this did was leave her with severe scarring. "There was no fancy keyhole surgery in those days," said Angela. "People ask me if I've been in a shark attack!"

To manage the pain, which often left her bedridden for days, Angela was prescribed powerful painkillers. But they "seemed to become less effective the longer I took them."

After the sixth failed operation, Angela's consultant decided enough was enough, and referred her to a rheumatology clinic. "The rheumatologist gave me hope for the first time in years," said Angela. "He said he would be able to help."

Angela was prescribed a cocktail of anti-inflammatory drugs including sulfasalazine, an immune system-suppressing drug used to treat rheumatoid arthritis.

"They thought the problem could be to do with my immune system rather than a mechanical issue," said Angela, "although they never actually diagnosed me with rheumatoid arthritis."

Initially, Angela suffered with terrible side-effects from the drugs. But she was persuaded to persist with them, and after three months she began to notice an improvement in her knee. "The swelling went down dramatically for the first time," Angela said, "and it was not long before I was able to dispense with the crutches."

Natural thinking

Buoyed by the success of the drug treatment, Angela started to look into other approaches that could potentially help her knee further, such as an anti-inflammatory diet and herbal medicine.

"I had a friend who was studying nutrition at the time. She put me on a three-week juice fast followed by a Paleo-style diet," said Angela. "I also started taking anti-inflammatory herbs like devil's claw and chamomile."

Angela was keen to reduce the amount of medication she was on, but her rheumatologist advised against it, telling her she'd likely have to take the drugs for the rest of her life.

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