

Food And Arthritis

No drug or food is able to cure arthritis. But there is no doubt that attention to your diet can usually help to relieve the symptoms.

While extreme diets should be avoided, even if you need to lose weight, healthy food choices should become a part of your daily life. A healthy, balanced diet requires a broad variety from different food groups in quantities that are appropriate for you.

People with rheumatoid arthritis often lose their appetite. If this happens to you, try eating more meals in smaller portions throughout the day. This will help provide the sustenance you need.

Avoid fasting or crash dieting because it will only make your symptoms worse.

There are five dietary and lifestyle modifications you can make to lessen the joint pain and early morning stiffness.

1. HEALTHY WEIGHT

Being overweight increases the load on weight-bearing joints such as hips, knees and lower spine. So if you're carrying excess, it's time to watch your diet, making portion sizes modest, keeping total fat down and increasing your intake of low-kilojoule vegetables and salads.

2. MORE OMEGA-3 FATS

The people of Greenland have diets high in omega-3 fats from fish. They also have low rates of many diseases including inflammatory conditions such as arthritis. Studies show that high intakes of these omega-3 fats can have a 'calming' effect on arthritis, particularly rheumatoid arthritis.

So some fats are good for you and some are not. Scientific studies have shown that certain types of fats in the diet can provide benefits for people with arthritis. While these effects are typically modest compared with anti-inflammatory drugs, they can be achieved without serious side effects and include other health benefits such as reduced risk of heart disease.

Fats can be divided broadly into three groups based upon their chemical structure.

Saturated fats are mainly in animal products such as meats and dairy products. They are linked with increased risk of heart disease and it is not considered healthy to eat these fats to excess.

Mono-unsaturated fats are mainly in olive oil.

Poly-unsaturated fats can be divided into two groups: omega-3 and omega-6. Within the omega-3 group, there are two sub-groups called ALA (found in flaxseed and flaxseed oil, canola oil and green leafy vegetables) and EPA and DHA, found in fish and fish oil.

Omega-3 helps your body deal with inflammation while omega-6 does not. In fact, dietary omega-6 fats reduce your body's ability to take in omega-3 fats.

The simplest and healthiest way to boost your omega-3 is to eat oily fish. Try to have a fish meal at least three times a week. If you are unable to eat enough fish, try fish oil supplements. There are many different brands of fish oil capsules on the market available at health food stores or at a pharmacy. They differ in the level of EPA and DHA that they contain. The capsules can be expensive so it is worthwhile to compare prices, capsule size as well as EPA level. If your diet includes at least a couple of fish meals each week, two or three capsules a day will be adequate but, if you do not eat fish, you may need five or six a day. The cheapest source of EPA is cod liver oil, but large doses can deliver potentially dangerous levels of Vitamin A. If you take more than 15ml a day, you should also use a devitaminised formulation. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

Other sources of omega-3 are, as we mentioned, flaxseed, canola oil and leafy green vegetables. Flaxseed and canola contain ALA which can be converted by the body to EPA. Ground or crushed flaxseed can be added to wheat bran, muesli or fresh fruit to make a great breakfast cereal with low fat milk. Only high quality flaxseed oil is suitable for consumption. Make sure it is cold-pressed and in a dark bottle. To prevent rancidity, always keep it in the fridge and never decant to another container. Flaxseed oil is best used in cold food applications such as in salad dressing and mayonnaise. It is not recommended for frying as heat increases its rancidity. Canola oil contains less ALA than flaxseed.

An increasing range of spreads and other products fortified with omega-3 are coming on to the market.

But the good omega-3 fats will work better if you also cut back your intake of omega-6 fats. The table below shows you how to achieve this.

Eat more foods rich in omega-3	Eat less foods rich in omega-6
oily fresh, canned and smoked fish (mackerel, tuna, salmon, sardines) white fish (snapper, perch, gemfish) seafood	
omega-enriched eggs	
olive oils and oils and spreads from flaxseed, canola and wheat germ	oils and spreads from safflower, sunflower, peanuts, soy beans, corn and sesame seeds
walnuts	almonds, brazil nuts, cashews, peanuts, pecans, pine nuts

3. ANTI-OXIDANTS

Prepare and eat lots of vegetables and fruit (particularly those with bright colours), wholegrain cereals, wholemeal or rye breads, tea, dark chocolate and the occasional glass of red wine. Use lots of herbs like basil, coriander, mint and parsley in your cooking.

4. MOVE IT OR LOSE IT!

Research shows that, after medication, exercise can bring the greatest relief for arthritis sufferers (see our Exercise Fact Sheet). It helps to avoid stiffness, strengthen muscles and burn off excess fat. Walking, swimming, yoga, Pilates, tai chi, stationary cycling and dancing are excellent. If well designed, an exercise program should not put you at any risk.

5. EATER BEWARE

View with scepticism any diet that promises to cure arthritis by eating (or avoiding) certain foods. While they generally cause no harm, any improvement you notice is often due to the fact that you have shed a few kilos and lessened the load on inflamed and sore joints! Remember that food restriction of any kind (including fasting and vegetarian eating) is known to improve arthritis symptoms in the short term by reducing the immune response. And some forms of arthritis can go into remission. If this occurs at the same time as you try a supposed cure, then naturally you feel the cure has worked.

SUPPLEMENTS AND FOOD MYTHS

Doctors are understandably cautious about recommending supplements as many desperate people have been ripped off by 'miracle cures' of dubious benefit.

Let's examine what's looking promising and debunk the tall tales.

Cider vinegar

Over the years, numerous claims have been made for cider vinegar but none of them has stood up to scientific scrutiny. Cider vinegar will not dissolve deposits of crystals from around the joints and may irritate the lining of the stomach and bowel if consumed in large quantities.

Nightshade vegetables

Potatoes, eggplants, capsicum and tomatoes belong to the nightshade family (botanic name *Solanus*) and have been under a cloud for years. Many sufferers say they cause their arthritis to flare up but there is no proof to this myth, which probably arose because of their association with Deadly Nightshade, a quite different plant.

Bear in mind that there is great individual reaction to foods which may sometimes be due to an underlying food intolerance. Some people always notice a reaction when they eat a culprit food (say tomatoes or red wine), while some have trouble only if they eat them in large amounts and other people can consume them freely. If you feel that certain foods may be triggering problems, talk to a dietitian or your doctor. They may suggest you embark on an elimination diet to test for food sensitivities.

Acid-producing foods

Arthritis is not caused by eating foods like oranges, lemons or tomatoes. Even though they taste acidic, their acidity is small compared to the level in our stomach. If you find, however, that they upset you, then this may be an individual food sensitivity (see above).

Glucosamine

Glucosamine occurs naturally as a building block your body needs to regenerate cartilage and lubricate your joints. Commercially, glucosamine sulphate is extracted from the shells of prawns and other shellfish and is now becoming part of arthritis treatment. Research shows it can relieve pain in osteoarthritis as effectively as most current arthritis medications but with the added advantage of slowing the progression of joint damage. Check with your doctor as it can interact with some medication, affect blood sugars in those with diabetes and cause reactions in those allergic to shellfish. See our separate Fact Sheet for more detailed information on glucosamine.

Green tea

Research on animals suggests that green tea may be useful in treating and preventing arthritis. While we await more definitive research, sipping green tea every day is worth considering as it is generally safe even in large amounts, has no kilojoules and adds valuable anti-oxidants to your system.

Ginger

Alternative practitioners have long believed that ginger has anti-inflammatory properties that may help relieve the pain associated with both rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Now there's research emerging to confirm this. But before you take ginger, especially as capsules or tincture, consult your doctor because large doses can have side effects or interfere with other medications.

DIET AND GOUT

Gout is a common and painful type of arthritis that occurs when uric acid crystals are deposited in the joints. The body reacts to these deposits causing inflammation. Gout usually affects one joint at a time, especially the joint of the big toe. It can also affect the knee, ankle, foot, hand, wrist and elbow.

Genetic factors are important in gout, reflected in the fact that it affects mainly men and tends to run in families.

Avoidable risks including being overweight and drinking excessive amounts of alcohol.

Certain foods should be avoided because they are high in purines. In fact, purines are present in all living matter to a greater or lesser extent and they break down to form uric acid. Food groups with the highest purine content (and therefore should be avoided by sufferers of gout) include:

- sardines, anchovies and herrings
- kidneys, liver and sweetbreads
- yeast.

Exercise caution in eating:

- shellfish and other seafood
- red meat, meat soups and broths
- poultry
- beans, peas and lentils
- wheat germ and bran
- oatmeal
- spinach.

Foods that are lowest in purines include:

- fruit, nuts and fats of all kinds
- vegetables, except those already listed
- most breads, cereal and cereal products
- sugars, syrups, sweets and fruit desserts
- milk, cheese and eggs
- gelatin.

It is very important to drink two to three litres of non-alcoholic fluids every day because this will increase the clearance of uric acid from your body. Limit alcohol consumption to two standard drinks a week and avoid beer completely.

FOOD AND MEDICATION

Medication used to alleviate the symptoms of arthritis can interact with food. When you are given a medication prescription, it may be wise to ask the doctor or pharmacist the following:

- Should the medication be taken with food or on an empty stomach?
- Will it affect your nutritional requirements?
- What actions can you take to prevent or control possible problems?

Your sense of taste may be diminished by some medications. Extra seasoning in your food may help.

For more information about healthy eating, diet and arthritis refer to nutritionist Catherine Saxelby's website at www.foodwatch.com.au

For further information and details of local arthritis management and support programs contact your State/Territory Arthritis Office on 1800 011 041