

## Arthritis and diet

No special diet or 'miracle food' can cure arthritis, but some conditions may be helped by avoiding or including certain foods or supplements. Arthritis is a general term describing over 100 different conditions that cause pain, stiffness and (often) inflammation in one or more joints. Everyone with arthritis can benefit from eating a healthy, well-balanced diet to maintain general good health.

Some conditions may be helped by dietary changes. For example, people with inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis seem to benefit from an increased intake of omega-3 fats, found in oily fish such as sardines and salmon, while gout sufferers may benefit from avoiding foods high in purines, including offal, shellfish and beer and drinking plenty of water.

Always seek the advice of your doctor or dietitian before changing your diet. You may be restricting your food intake unnecessarily or taking too much of products (such as mineral supplements) that may have no impact on your condition at all. Some supplements can also interact with other medications.

### Dietary recommendations for arthritis

General dietary recommendations for a person with arthritis include:

- Eat a well-balanced diet. This will help to maintain general good health, and a healthy weight.
- Avoid crash dieting or fasting.
- Increase dietary calcium to reduce the risk of osteoporosis in later life.
- Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids.
- Keep your weight within the normal range. Excess bodyweight increases the stress on joints, especially weight-bearing joints such as the knee and hips.

### Dietary modification for gout

Uric acid is a waste product that is normally excreted from the body in urine. Gout is a type of arthritis characterised by the build-up of uric acid in the joints (such as the big toe), which causes inflammation and pain.

It is believed that lowering uric acid levels through small changes in your diet may help reduce the chance of future gout attacks. These changes include:

- Restrict or avoid alcohol.
- Avoid binge drinking.
- Restrict or avoid offal meats, such as liver, kidneys and brains.
- Restrict or avoid shellfish, such as prawns and scallops.
- Restrict or avoid some seafoods including sardines, herrings, mackerel and anchovies.
- Restrict or avoid products containing yeast, such as beer and Vegemite.
- Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids.
- Avoid fasting or 'crash' dieting
- Make sure you don't overeat on a regular basis.
- Take your time when eating.

### Omega-3 fats and inflammation

Foods that contain omega-3 fats have been found to help reduce the inflammation associated with some forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis. These effects are modest compared with medications, however they do not have side effects, and may also have other health benefits, such as reduced heart disease.

Foods rich in omega-3 fats include:

- Fish – oily fish such as salmon and sardines, have greater amounts of omega-3 fats
- Linseeds and linseed (flaxseed) oil
- Canola (rapeseed) oil
- Walnuts
- Foods fortified with omega-3, such as margarines and eggs
- Some fish oil supplements.

It is important not to confuse fish oils with fish liver oils (such as cod liver oil and halibut liver oil). Fish liver oils also contain vitamin A. Large amounts of vitamin A can cause serious side effects. Ask your doctor before taking any supplements, to ensure the correct dosage.

## **Other supplements for arthritis**

The supplements glucosamine and chondroitin are popular – yet evidence about their success in treating arthritis is limited.

Studies show that glucosamine and chondroitin, taken either separately or in combination, may relieve pain for people with osteoarthritis where there has been a breakdown of cartilage. There is no evidence that these supplements are effective for any other forms of arthritis.

Glucosamine and chondroitin may interact with other medications, including warfarin, and should only be taken after consultation with your doctor.

## **Obesity may worsen arthritis symptoms**

If you are overweight or obese, the extra load on your joints may be exacerbating your arthritis symptoms, especially if your affected joints include those of the hip, knee or spine. There is also a clear link between being overweight and an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis.

To lose excess weight you must be active, but this can be difficult for people with arthritis due to pain or stiffness. See your doctor, dietitian or health professional for information and advice.

## **Current evidence for dietary cures is sparse**

Gout can be helped by avoiding some foods. However, there is no substantial scientific evidence that other forms of arthritis can be helped by avoiding particular foods, unless that person has specifically shown intolerance to them.

There is no evidence that acidic foods (such as lemons), 'nightshade' foods (such as tomatoes, potatoes and eggplants) or dairy foods trigger arthritis symptoms. These foods all contain important nutrients and avoiding them may be a health risk.

## **Tips for managing arthritis and diet**

If you think a particular food may aggravate your arthritis, it can help to keep a diary of your food intake and symptoms. After a month, you may have some idea about which food could be provoking symptoms. Discuss these results with your doctor or a dietitian.

Don't cut whole food groups from your diet – for example, all dairy products – without talking to your doctor, as you may miss out on important vitamins and minerals.

## **Remember that remission from arthritis may be coincidental**

The symptoms of arthritis, particularly the inflammatory types, can change for no apparent reason. Don't assume any improvement in your symptoms is due to what you eat or avoid. Be guided by your health professional.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. (02) 6163 5200 or 1800 812 942
- Arthritis Foundation of Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041

## Things to remember

- Arthritis is a general term describing over 100 different conditions that cause pain, stiffness and (often) inflammation in one or more joints.
- No special diet or 'miracle food' can cure arthritis, but some conditions may be helped by dietary changes.
- Fish oil can ease the symptoms of inflammatory types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis.
- The symptoms of gout can be eased by avoiding alcohol and offal meats, and by drinking plenty of water.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

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