

DIET AND ARTHRITIS

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



The most important thing that you can do if you have arthritis is to eat a well-balanced diet and to keep to a healthy weight. Contrary to popular belief, there are no particular diets or types of food that will make arthritis better or worse.

Healthy Eating

Several different diets have been tested clinically for rheumatoid arthritis (RA), including the vegan or vegetarian diet, the elemental diet, the exclusion diet and the Mediterranean diet. No particular diet has been shown to help with RA, although evidence suggests that the Mediterranean diet can reduce the risks of Type 2 diabetes, certain cancers and cardiovascular diseases, such as stroke and heart attacks.

A recent US study showed that people with osteoarthritis (OA) may experience less pain and improved function when following a Mediterranean diet. A separate study of people with OA found that those who had diets higher in total and saturated fat experienced worsening of their symptoms, compared to those with a lower-fat diet. As there is no definite evidence that any particular diet can affect arthritis, eating a healthy and well-balanced diet is the most sensible approach. This means eating enough calories (energy) and nutrients, to stay well and keep to a healthy body weight. The latest guidance from Public Health England **Eatwell Guide** provides information about healthy eating in general.

Weight Management & Arthritis

The most important link between diet and OA is body weight. Being overweight increases the risk of OA and worsens the pain in many joints, especially in the knees, hips and feet. For every kilogram (2.2 pounds) above a healthy weight, an extra 5kg (11 pounds) of weight passes directly through the weight-bearing joints, putting extra stress on them. Being overweight can also increase the risk of developing gout. Even as little as 5% of weight loss can reduce pain significantly, especially in the knees, and is one of the most important things that you can do to help yourself.

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For instance, if you weigh 100kg (15 stone 10 pounds), losing just 10kg (22 pounds) can make a big difference to your pain. If you have rheumatoid and psoriatic arthritis, being overweight means that your arthritis is much less likely to respond to medicines and go into remission. People with rheumatoid and psoriatic arthritis also have a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, so keeping to a healthy weight is even more important for them.

Acidic Foods

Some people believe that eating so-called acidic foods, such as oranges, can make their arthritis worse. In fact, no foods can change the acidity in our bodies and there is no evidence that eating acidic foods makes arthritis any worse, or that avoiding these foods can help treat arthritis.

Nightshade Family of Vegetables

Another popular belief is that foods from the nightshade family, such as tomatoes, potatoes and peppers, can make arthritis worse. There is no evidence that this is the case or that avoiding these foods can help treat arthritis. If anything, these foods have high levels of antioxidants which may help reduce the risk of arthritis progression, especially OA.

Food Allergies & Intolerance

The connection between food allergy or intolerance and arthritis is controversial. Research has shown that less than 5% of people with RA have definite sensitivity to certain foods, a percentage no different to the general population. Interestingly, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and alcohol can increase the permeability of the gut which might affect food sensitivity. Provided you have a balanced diet, there is no harm in avoiding certain foods to see if these make a difference to your arthritis, but make sure that you speak to your GP before trying this.

Gout & Diet

Gout is caused by too much uric acid in the blood. Only a small amount of uric acid comes from our diet. High uric acid is sometimes caused by genetic factors but more often by certain drugs, drinking too much alcohol, and by being overweight.

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If you have gout, the most important thing you can do to help yourself is to keep to a healthy weight, reduce your alcohol intake - especially beer - and stay well-hydrated. Do not try to lose weight too quickly by fasting, using fad diets or by completely cutting out carbohydrates. Doing this can actually increase uric acid levels in the body and make gout worse. Drinking cherry extract and increasing your intake of low fat dairy products such as skimmed milk may also help reduce uric acid levels and the risk of acute gout attacks.

Supplements

Many people with arthritis use dietary supplements although there is not much evidence that they work. Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids may help people with inflammatory arthritis such as RA and psoriatic arthritis, but not OA. There is no evidence that cod liver oil can reduce the symptoms of arthritis. People with OA often take glucosamine sulphate or chondroitin tablets which are made from shellfish. Studies have not shown convincing evidence that they help and they are not recommended in current guidelines. Many people with arthritis have also tried rose hip and curcumin. Trials of these supplements have often shown conflicting results, however some people with arthritis may find a small benefit.

People with arthritis may be at risk of vitamin D deficiency. Vitamin D is essential for bone and muscle health and the main source of Vitamin D is sunlight. Current Department of Health guidelines recommend that all adults should consider a vitamin D supplement of 10 micrograms (400 IU) daily between October and the end of March when there is not enough sunshine. People at risk of Vitamin D deficiency should consider a supplement all year round.

We are all individuals and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to diet and arthritis. Members can discuss and explore the benefits of a personalised eating plan with our Arthritis Action Dietitian.