Diet and Inflammatory Arthritis: An Overview

DIET AND NUTRITION



Since the 1950s, diet has often been linked to arthritis. Today, online platforms and social media influencers continue to share advice that is not always supported by scientific evidence.
Around 75% of people with inflammatory arthritis believe diet affects their symptoms, and about 50% have tried dietary changes to manage disease activity. This makes it important for people living with inflammatory arthritis to understand what the evidence currently shows.

Facts About Diet and Inflammatory Arthritis

- **No diet cures arthritis.** Nutrition can support treatment, but it should not replace prescribed medication.

- **A Mediterranean-style diet has one of the strongest evidence bases.** This includes plenty of colourful vegetables and fruit, wholegrains, pulses, nuts, olive oil and oily fish, with less red

meat and fewer sugary, high-fat, ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

- **A plant-based diet is helpful too.**

- **Higher body weight and body fat can affect symptoms and treatment response.** Weight loss may reduce pressure on the joints, improve pain and function, and help some specialist medicines, such as biologics, work more effectively.

- **Holistic measures matter.** A combination of good nutrition, physical activity, better quality sleep and sensible pain management are key.

- **Not all ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are inherently bad for health.** Wholegrain sliced breads, fortified plant milks with added calcium, high-fibre breakfast cereals, and tofu all count as ultra-processed foods and yet they provide fibre, often added vitamins, and protein to our diet. While not all ultra-processed foods are unhealthy, foods that are high in sugar and fat and provide little nutritional value are less beneficial to our diet.

- **Advice online, from social media, friends and family can create confusion.** Diet advice online often promises quick fixes, but inflammatory arthritis is often complex and individualised.

- **Food avoidance is unnecessary.** Nightshade vegetables, dairy, and gluten are some of the examples. Some people report benefits from avoiding certain foods, but broad elimination is not helpful and could lead to nutrient deficiencies.

- **Supplements are overpromised and deliver little.** There is no scientific evidence to support the long-term efficacy of dietary supplements for inflammatory arthritis. The placebo effect is a strong factor here, i.e., you have invested in something therefore you want to believe it is working.

What to Remember

There is no silver bullet here. Aim for a consistent, varied and sustainable eating regime. Eat more plants, wholegrains, beans, nuts, olive oil and oily fish; reduce or limit ultra-processed foods, excess sugar and saturated fat and aim for a healthy body weight.

Useful resources

- Learn more about **Diet and Arthritis**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/living-with-arthritis/self-management/diet-and-arthritis**
- Watch Martin Lau and Services Manager Marc Williams on **Arthritis Fact Checked: Diet and Arthritis**: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emjthT3cfb0**

References

1. Cutolo M, Nikiphorou E. don't neglect nutrition in rheumatoid arthritis.RMD Open 2018;4:e000591.
2. Nutrition and Chronic Pain. International Association for the Study of Pain. https://www.iasp-pain.org/resources/fact-sheets/nutrition-and-chronic-pain. Accessed on the 30/8/2026.

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Author: Martin Lau, Services Manager and Dietitian - Arthritis Action