

Arthritis & Diet

Fact Sheet



Global arthritis prevalence has increased more than 113% since 1990. Among the various types of arthritis, osteoarthritis is the most prevalent. Additionally, there are other forms of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis, gout, and lupus. Current research shows that foods can play a substantial role in arthritis.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a condition characterized by a gradual deterioration of cartilage and the growth of bone in the joints, primarily affecting areas such as the knees, hips, spine, and fingers. It is estimated that over 24% of Americans suffer from OA, and the risk of developing it tends to increase with age. The progression of OA is typically gradual and can lead to discomfort and stiffness in the affected joints.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA), on the other hand, is a more aggressive form of arthritis that affects over 1.3 million Americans. RA is an autoimmune disease, which means your immune system mistakenly attacks your own body's tissues. In contrast to the gradual degeneration seen in osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis targets the protective lining of your joints. This leads to painful swelling, which, if left untreated, can potentially lead to bone erosion and deformity in the affected joints.

Gout is a form of arthritis that primarily affects the feet (big toe). It is caused by the buildup of uric acid crystals in the joints, leading to sudden and severe pain, swelling, and redness in the affected area. If left untreated, gout can result in repeated and recurrent episodes of joint inflammation, which may eventually lead to joint damage and the formation of hard nodules around the joints.

Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that can affect various parts of the body, including the joints, skin, kidneys, heart, and other organs. It occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissues, leading to inflammation. Joint pain and swelling are common symptoms of lupus, although the disease can also cause a wide range of other symptoms, such as fatigue, skin rashes, and organ dysfunction. Lupus is a complex condition with varying manifestations and severity among individuals.

Diet and Osteoarthritis

While the exact mechanisms are not fully understood, the effects of a healthy diet on OA may involve reduced inflammation and fostering a healthy body weight. Overweight and obese individuals are more than twice as likely to develop OA compared to those with normal weight. Interestingly, even a modest amount of weight loss can significantly lower this risk. Considering that plant-based diets are associated with lower body weight and facilitate weight reduction, they can be valuable strategies in the treatment and prevention of osteoarthritis.

A 2015 study demonstrated that adopting a whole food, plant-based diet led to a significant reduction in OA pain within two weeks. By the end of the six-week study, participants reported enhanced energy levels and improved physical functioning.

Diet and Rheumatoid Arthritis

According to a study published in *Rheumatology*, adopting a gluten-free, vegan diet has shown improvement in the signs and symptoms of RA. In a comprehensive study examining the impact of a very low-fat vegan diet on individuals with RA, notable improvements were observed within just four weeks. Participants experienced reduced morning stiffness, decreased RA pain, alleviated joint tenderness, and diminished joint swelling.

A systematic review has suggested that fasting followed by a vegetarian or vegan diet could potentially be beneficial in the treatment of RA. Weight management can also help. Research has demonstrated that individuals with RA who are overweight tend to experience less favorable results compared to those who maintain a healthy weight. Moreover, studies indicate that specific foods have the potential to provoke symptoms of arthritis in certain individuals.

Understanding Food Triggers

While the relationship between diet and arthritis is complex and can vary from person to person, it is believed that specific foods may act as triggers, contributing to joint pain and inflammation. By identifying and managing these food triggers, you can potentially alleviate your arthritis symptoms and improve your overall quality of life.

Certain foods have been identified as potential culprits for exacerbating joint pain.

Common Food Triggers

- Cane sugar
- Meat, dairy, eggs
- Wheat, barley, rye
- Oats
- Nightshade vegetables
- Corn
- Soy
- Peanuts
- Alcohol
- Caffeine

To determine if any foods are triggering your arthritis pain, it is recommended to embark on an elimination diet. This involves temporarily removing potential trigger foods from your diet and observing any changes in your symptoms. For a period of two weeks, focus on consuming foods from the pain-safe list. Pain-safe foods virtually never contribute to arthritis, headaches, or other painful conditions.

Pain-Safe Foods

- Rice
- Cooked green vegetables
- Cooked orange vegetables
- Cooked yellow vegetables
- Cooked or dried noncitrus fruits

After the two-week elimination phase, you can begin the process of reintroducing the eliminated foods one at a time, every two days. Monitor your body's response during this period and pay attention to any changes in your arthritis symptoms. If you notice an increase in pain, stiffness, or inflammation after reintroducing a specific food, it is likely that food is a trigger for you.

While identifying your individual food triggers is essential, it is worth noting that some general dietary guidelines can benefit most individuals with arthritis. Aim for a diet rich in anti-inflammatory foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. These foods contain nutrients and compounds that can help reduce inflammation and support joint health. Additionally, maintaining a healthy weight and staying hydrated are also important factors in managing arthritis symptoms.

It is important to remember that managing arthritis through diet is a highly personalized process. What works for one person may not work for another, so it is crucial to listen to your body and seek guidance from a healthcare professional or registered dietitian who specializes in arthritis or inflammatory conditions. By understanding and managing your diet, you can take an active role in your arthritis management and work towards a better quality of life.

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