

Healthy eating and arthritis

This sheet has been written to address some common myths about food and arthritis. It provides general information about healthy eating and where to go for further information and advice. This sheet does not provide specific advice for people with other medical conditions or food intolerances.

Is there a diet to cure arthritis?

No diet has been proven by research to cure arthritis. Be very cautious of special diets or supplements that claim to cure arthritis. The best diet for arthritis is a healthy, balanced one to maintain your general health and prevent other medical problems.

Choosing the right fats

Research suggests that eating foods with healthy fats rather than foods with unhealthy fats may help reduce the symptoms of arthritis. While these effects are modest compared to medicines, healthier fats do not have any serious side effects. They also have other health benefits, such as reduced risk of heart disease.

Healthier dietary fat

- **Monounsaturated fat:** Researchers have found a link between these types of fats and reduced disease activity in rheumatoid arthritis. Foods that are high in monounsaturated fats include vegetable oils (olive oil, canola oil, sunflower oil), avocados and many nuts and seeds.
- **Omega-3 fats:** Studies show that eating foods rich in omega-3 fats can help reduce inflammation, particularly in rheumatoid arthritis. Foods rich in omega-3 fats include:
 - **fish:** oily fish, such as sardines and salmon, have greater amounts of omega-3 fats.
 - **fish oil supplements:** see the *Fish oils* sheet for more information
 - **ground linseeds and linseed oil** (also called flaxseed)
 - **canola oil** (also called rapeseed oil)
 - **walnuts.**

Harmful dietary fat

- **Saturated fat:** This is a type of fat that comes mainly from red meat, poultry and full-fat dairy products. Saturated fat raises total blood cholesterol levels, particularly unhealthy LDL-cholesterol. This type of cholesterol has been linked with increased cartilage damage in people with osteoarthritis. These fats can also increase your risk of cardiovascular disease.

Does weight affect arthritis?

The simple answer is yes. Extra body weight increases the stress on many joints, particularly the knees, hips and lower back. There is also a clear link between being overweight and an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis. If you are overweight, losing weight will decrease the stress on your joints, reduce pain and make it easier for you to move around.

Do certain foods cause arthritis?

There is very little proof that specific foods have an effect on arthritis. The exception to this is gout (see gout section below). Arthritis symptoms usually vary day to day. This makes it hard to know if a change in symptoms is because of a particular change in food or just coincidence. Some people with arthritis report improvements after avoiding certain foods. However this is usually due to individual food intolerances (see below).

I heard I should avoid...

- **Nightshade foods**
This food group includes tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and capsicum. There is no proof that these foods have any effect on arthritis symptoms.

• Acid-producing foods

Arthritis is not caused by eating 'acidic foods' like oranges, lemons or tomatoes. Very few foods are as acidic as our digestive juices. Foods termed 'acidic' are usually very rich in vitamin C, which is beneficial to the immune system. So avoiding these may do more harm than good.

• Dairy products

There is no proof that dairy products cause arthritis. Dairy products are a rich source of calcium, which is an important building block for strong bones. Many people with arthritis are at an increased risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) so dairy products may be extra important to maintain bone health.

• Meat and meat products

There is mixed evidence about the effects of vegetarian diets on arthritis. These diets tend to increase your intake of vitamins as you eat more vegetables and fruits. Lower levels of fat in this diet may also help you to lose weight. These factors may help with arthritis symptoms. However a strict vegetarian diet may mean you miss out on other important nutrients, such as iron and vitamin B12.

Food intolerance

Some people may have a reaction, such as an upset stomach, after eating or drinking certain foods. This may be due to a

food intolerance. If you feel that certain foods are causing problems, talk to a dietitian or your doctor. They may suggest you be tested for food intolerances. Do not cut whole food groups from your diet without talking to your doctor as you may miss out on important vitamins and minerals.

Gout

For some people with gout, certain foods appear to trigger attacks of gout. These foods tend to have high levels of purine, a substance that can be made into uric acid in the body.

For more information see the *Gout and diet* information sheet.

A guide to healthy eating

The best diet for arthritis is a healthy, balanced diet. This can help you reach and maintain a healthy weight and reduce your risk of other health problems. Talk to your doctor or see the Australian Dietary Guidelines at www.eatforhealth.gov.au to learn about the amount and kinds of foods that we need to eat for health and wellbeing. You may also find it helpful to see a dietitian for advice that is tailored to your individual needs.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

There is no diet that can cure arthritis. A healthy, balanced diet is best.

For more information:

To find a dietitian, talk to your doctor, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia on 1800 812 942 or use the 'find a dietitian' service at www.daa.asn.au

Books: Rayman, Margaret & Callaghan, Alison 2006, *Nutrition and arthritis*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

Websites: Nutrition Australia www.nutritionaustralia.org
Australian Dietary Guidelines www.eatforhealth.gov.au