

Can Your Diet Help Relieve Rheumatoid Arthritis?



If you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, you may have heard that a specific diet or certain foods can ease your pain, stiffness, and fatigue. Someday, food may be the medicine of choice for those with arthritis and related inflammatory diseases. For now, though, here's information that may help you separate the facts from the myths about diet and rheumatoid arthritis.

Can the Arthritis Diet Help my Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Eating certain foods or avoiding certain foods may help your rheumatoid arthritis symptoms. However, according to the Arthritis Foundation, there is no specific "arthritis diet." On the other hand, if you find certain foods worsen your rheumatoid arthritis symptoms and others help your symptoms to improve, it makes sense to make some adjustments in your diet.

A recent study showed that 30% to 40% of people with rheumatoid arthritis may benefit from excluding "suspect" foods that are identified with an elimination diet. An elimination diet guides you in removing suspected "trigger" foods from your daily diet. Then, after a period of time, you slowly add the suspect foods back into your diet and watch for increased pain and stiffness. For some people, eliminating those foods that seem to trigger pain and stiffness may help decrease rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

Can Some Fats Increase Inflammation in Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Yes. Studies show that saturated fats may increase inflammation in the body. Foods high in saturated fats, such as animal products like bacon, steak, butter, and cream, may increase inflammatory chemicals in the body called prostaglandins. Prostaglandins are chemicals that cause inflammation, pain, swelling, and joint destruction in rheumatoid arthritis.

In addition, some findings confirm that meat contains high amounts of arachidonic acid. Arachidonic acid is a fatty acid that's converted to inflammatory prostaglandins in the body. Some people with rheumatoid arthritis find that a vegetarian diet helps relieve symptoms of pain and stiffness. Other people with rheumatoid arthritis, however, get no benefit from eating a diet that eliminates meat.

Is Omega-6 Fatty Acid Linked to Inflammation With Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Omega-6 fatty acids are in vegetable oils that contain linoleic acid. This group of vegetable oils includes corn oil, soybean oil, sunflower oil, wheat germ oil, and sesame oil. Studies show that a typical western diet has more omega-6 fatty acids compared to omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acid is a polyunsaturated fat found in cold-water fish.

Consuming excessive amounts of omega-6 fatty acids may promote illnesses such as cancer and cardiovascular disease. It may also promote inflammatory and/or autoimmune disease such as rheumatoid arthritis. Ingesting fewer omega-6 fatty acids and more omega-3 fatty acids, on the other hand, may suppress inflammation and decrease the risk of illness.

Many studies show that lowering the ratio of omega-6 fatty acids to omega-3 fatty acids contained in the diet can reduce the risk of illness.

How Can Omega-3 Fatty Acids Help Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Omega-3 fatty acids, the polyunsaturated fats found in cold-water fish, nuts, and other foods, may have an anti-inflammatory effect in the body. The marine omega-3 fatty acids contain EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). These are substances that may decrease inflammation. Some studies show a positive anti-inflammatory effect of omega-3 fatty acids with rheumatoid arthritis. The same is true for heart disease. This is important because people with rheumatoid arthritis also have a higher risk of heart disease.

Human studies with marine omega-3 fatty acids show a direct relationship between increased DHA consumption and diminished C-reactive protein levels. That means reduced inflammation.

Which Foods Have Omega-3 Fatty Acids That Might Help Rheumatoid Arthritis?

For omega-3 fatty acids, select cold-water fish such as salmon, tuna, and trout. Some plant foods are also sources of omega-3 fatty acids. They include walnuts, tofu, and soybean products, flaxseed and flaxseed oil, and canola oil.

Can Fish Oil Supplements Help Rheumatoid Arthritis?

According to the American College of Rheumatology, some patients with rheumatoid arthritis report an improvement in pain and joint tenderness when taking marine omega-3 fatty acid supplements. You may not notice any benefit at first from taking a fish oil supplement. It may take weeks or even months to see a decrease in symptoms. But studies do show that some people who have a high intake of omega-3 fatty acids benefit from decreased symptoms and less use of anti-inflammatory drugs.

The American College of Rheumatology reminds consumers that fish oil supplements may have high levels of vitamin A or mercury.

Can a Mediterranean-Type Diet Help Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Many studies suggest that a diet high in fruits, vegetables, and vitamin C may be linked to a lower risk of rheumatoid arthritis. In fact, we know that rheumatoid arthritis is less severe in some Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Italy. In those countries, the main diet consists of large amounts of fruits, vegetables, olive oil, and fatty fish high in omega-3s. The Mediterranean-type diet may even protect against severe rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

Fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes are high in phytonutrients. These are chemicals in plants that have disease-fighting properties and immune-boosting antioxidants such as vitamin C, vitamin E, selenium, and the carotenoids. A plant-based diet is also high in bioflavonoids. These are plant compounds that reportedly have anti-viral, anti-inflammatory, and anti-tumor activities.

Nutrition researchers who test the antioxidant activity of foods believe that certain foods may reduce the risk of some degenerative diseases associated with aging. These diseases include arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. More recent findings show that the higher intake of omega-3 fatty acids with the Mediterranean diet may be linked to the improvement in rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

What Vitamins and Minerals Are Important for Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Folic acid, or folate, is a B vitamin found in food. It can also be obtained by supplementation. It is important to you if you take methotrexate, a commonly prescribed medication for rheumatoid arthritis. Your body uses folic acid to manufacture red blood cells. Supplementing with folic acid may allow people with rheumatoid arthritis to avoid some side effects of methotrexate.

Selenium helps to fight free radicals that cause damage to healthy tissue. Some studies indicate that people with rheumatoid arthritis have reduced selenium levels in their blood. These findings are preliminary and no recommendations have been made for selenium supplementation. One 3.5-ounce serving of tuna gives you a full day's requirement of selenium.

Supplementing your diet with bone-boosting calcium and vitamin D is important, especially if you take corticosteroids (like prednisone) that can cause bone loss. The risk of bone loss is higher in people with rheumatoid arthritis. So check with your doctor to see how much calcium and vitamin D you need to get daily through foods, supplements, and sunlight.

What About Alcohol and Rheumatoid Arthritis?

A study published in the *Annals of Rheumatic Diseases* concluded that drinking alcohol may be linked to a significantly reduced chance of getting rheumatoid arthritis. While the researchers did not know how alcohol protects against rheumatoid arthritis, they believed the data should encourage further study on how arthritis may be prevented through diet and lifestyle measures. Talk to your doctor

about drinking alcohol if you take any rheumatoid arthritis medication. Avoid alcohol if you take methotrexate because liver damage could be a serious side effect.

Can Weight Loss Help my Rheumatoid Pain and Stiffness?

Yes. Studies show that dropping extra pounds is important for your joints and overall health. Excess pounds put extra strain on knees, hips, and other weight-bearing joints, not to mention your heart. Being overweight or obese actually worsens the joints -- making them stiffer and more painful -- and can exacerbate rheumatoid arthritis flares.

Source: WebMD.com

SOURCES:

Arthritis Foundation: "Common Therapies to Consider."

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine: "Rheumatoid Arthritis and Complementary and Alternative Medicine."

American College of Rheumatology: "Herbal and Natural Remedies."

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Reviewed by Marc C. Levesque, MD on March 07, 2010