



Dietary advice for people with Arthritis

This factsheet will discuss aspects of diet commonly linked to arthritis.

What is Arthritis?

Arthritis is the term given to inflammation of bone joints. There are two main types of arthritis – Rheumatoid Arthritis and Osteo-Arthritis.

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disorder which may affect many tissues and organs, but mainly attacks the joints.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is also known as degenerative arthritis or degenerative joint disease, and involves degrading of the joints – including both bone and cartilage. Symptoms of OA include joints pain, stiffness, inflammation, and locking of joints.

This factsheet will discuss aspects of diet and remedies commonly linked to arthritis. The main dietary message for both types of arthritis, is to follow a healthy well balanced diet.

So, what is a healthy balanced diet?

This type of diet has enough of all the nutrients needed to remain healthy and active. This is achievable by following the food pyramid for guidance. (See factsheet “The food pyramid”).

Specific nutrients to consider are mentioned below:

- **FATS:** The type of fats you use can affect inflammation and pain. Saturated fats (found in dairy-products, meats and processed foods) can increase pain and inflammation in the body. Polyunsaturates such as oils/margarines from corn and sunflower sources can also worsen inflammation. Monounsaturates are ‘neutral’ fats and do not encourage inflammation. Sources of these fats are olive oil, rapeseed oil, olive oil based margarines, and ‘blended’ vegetable oils.
- **OMEGA -3 FATS:** Substances naturally found in our foods called essential fatty acids (EFAs) can help people with arthritis by reducing inflammation, which is also of benefit in reducing long term risk of heart disease. Fish with darker flesh such as sardines, salmon, mackerel, kippers, trout and herrings are rich in omega-3 fats (often called fish body oils), two – three portions weekly gives maximum health benefit. Avocado, nuts, seeds and rapeseed oil are alternative sources of Omega-3 fats.
- **VITAMIN C:** Vitamin C is a powerful anti-oxidant which plays a role in fighting infection, and may work to control inflammation also. 5 portions of fruit & vegetables every day should meet your body’s vitamin C needs.
- **CALCIUM & VITAMIN D:** Choosing calcium-rich foods such as milk, cheese or yoghurts can help strengthen bones. Tinned sardines, fortified breakfast cereals and green leafy vegetables can also contribute to your calcium intake. Vitamin D helps the body to absorb Calcium. Sources of vitamin D include sunlight and fortified milks/spreads.
- **VITAMIN E:** Vitamin E has an important role in immune function. Fruits, green leafy vegetables, olive oil, nuts, seeds and whole grains are all good sources of Vitamin E.
- **ZINC:** Zinc is a mineral known for its inflammation fighting properties. You can find zinc in peanuts, red meat and legumes (beans, peas, lentils).



- **IRON:** blood levels of iron can lower during periods of inflammation and infection, and many people with arthritis has been shown to have low iron levels (anaemia). Eating a diet rich in iron can help prevent iron deficiency anaemia. These foods include: lean red meat, poultry, fortified breakfast cereals and dark green leafy vegetables. Vitamin C rich foods will help your body to absorb iron.

What other factors do I need to consider?

1. **Weight management:** obesity is an established risk for OA, particularly of the knee and hip. Being overweight puts extra strain on your joints, and can increase pain of arthritis. Research has shown that for every pound a person is overweight, this is equivalent to 2-3 pounds extra weight on their knee joints while walking. Even moderate weight loss in an overweight person can help ease symptoms of arthritis. See link to 'weigh2live' website for more information on weight management resources.
2. **Malnutrition** is also a common problem in people with arthritis. If you find you have difficulty eating, or preparing food because of your arthritis, talk to your doctor or practice nurse. Health professionals can use a nutritional screening tool such as MUST (Malnutrition universal screening tool) to help identify people who are at risk of malnutrition. More information on MUST can be found in the INDI factsheet "The MUST screening tool – how to use it".
3. The gastro-intestinal (GI) tract may play an important role in RA. Some people have a weakened gut, which allows allergens and pathogens to enter the body, in amounts large enough to cause overt symptoms of RA. Foods which have been shown to weaken the gut (in certain individuals) are strong tea, coffee, excessive alcohol, and highly spiced foods.
4. **Food myths:** There is a common belief that acidic foods e.g. citrus fruits, tomatoes, peppers will aggravate the symptoms of arthritis. However, there is little evidence to support this. In fact, foods rich in Vitamin C may help protect against inflammatory arthritis, and they are a rich source of other vitamins, minerals and fibre, which all form the basis of a well balanced diet.
5. **Food allergy/ intolerance:** Some people believe they may be allergic or intolerant to certain foods, and choose to eliminate foods or food groups as a result. These 'elimination' diets should only be undertaken with advice from a doctor or dietitian, as it is important not to miss out on essential nutrients by avoiding a certain food(s).
6. **Food supplements:** many people with arthritis are swayed by claims associated with various remedies associated with relieving symptoms. The most common supplements are: cod liver oil, evening primrose oil, iron, garlic, vitamin C, vitamin A, E, selenium, calcium, B-vitamin complex and multivitamins. Always discuss these supplements with your GP, dietitian or pharmacist to help prevent toxicity from mega-doses of individual nutrients.
7. **Alternative/complimentary products:**
 - (a) **glucosamine sulphate, chondroitin:** It is thought that in early stages of degenerative arthritis that these supplements may slow cartilage breakdown. However, currently there is little evidence to support widespread use of these supplements, despite them being commonly prescribed by doctors (NICE guidelines 2009). As a general rule of thumb, if no improvement is notable after 2 months of taking either/both of these supplements, they will probably not help, and should be discontinued.



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(b) Cod liver oil: There is little evidence to support use of cod liver oil in management of arthritis. As outlined earlier, omega 3 fats or fish body oils may ease inflammation. Care should be taken if taking a fish liver oil supplement, as they often contain high levels of Vitamin A. Pregnant women, or those planning to become pregnant should not take these supplements at all.

(c) Green tea extract, ginger, 'devil's claw', cayenne, willow bark, shark cartilage and many many more are also often put forward as aiding relief of arthritic symptoms. However, there is also a poor evidence base for use of these remedies. Before commencing any such remedy discuss with your GP, dietitian or pharmacist.

In summary:

Overall, a varied well balanced diet is recommended for management of arthritic conditions. Talk to your doctor or dietitian about dietary changes which may be of benefit to you. Further dietary information can be found in the factsheets section of www.indi.ie or at www.arthritisireland.ie

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