



Diet

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Arthritis is a general term that refers to conditions that cause joint or muscle pain.

While there is no special diet or food that can cure arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, everyone can benefit from eating a healthy, well-balanced diet to maintain general good health.

Making changes to your diet may help people with some types of arthritis..

For example omega-3 fats in oily fish like sardines and salmon may help inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. People with gout may benefit from reducing their intake of foods like offal, shellfish and beer that are high in purines and by drinking plenty of water.

Importantly while dietary changes may help with both gout and inflammatory arthritis, medication is vital for keeping the condition under control.

Healthy eating

Your body works best, and you feel better, if you eat a wide range of healthy foods. A balanced, varied diet provides all the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients your body needs. Along with adequate fluid intake you'll have more energy, control over your weight and a greater sense of wellbeing which can alleviate your symptoms.

But always get advice from your doctor or dietitian before changing your diet so you aren't unnecessarily restricting your food intake, or taking too much of something – like mineral supplements – that may have no impact on your condition. Some supplements can interact with your medication or be harmful in high doses.

Maintain a healthy weight

There's a clear link between being overweight or obese and an increased risk of osteoarthritis. The extra load on your joints can worsen arthritis symptoms, especially if it's in your hips, knees, feet or spine. Activity can help you lose excess weight but the pain, fatigue or stiffness of arthritis makes this hard. Talk to your doctor, dietitian or health professional about healthy eating, weight loss and exercising safely.

Omega-3 fats and inflammation

Foods that contain omega-3 fats have been found to help reduce the inflammation associated with some forms of inflammatory arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis. These effects are modest compared with medication, however they don't have side effects and may also have other health benefits, such as reduced heart disease.

Foods rich in omega-3 fats include:

- fish – oily fish such as salmon and sardines
- linseeds and linseed (flaxseed) oil
- canola (rapeseed) oil
- walnuts
- foods fortified with omega-3, e.g. margarines and eggs

- some fish oil supplements.

Don't confuse fish oils with fish liver oils (cod liver oil, halibut liver oil etc). Fish liver oils contain vitamin A which in large amounts, can have serious side effects.

Consult your doctor before taking any supplements, to be sure you need them and that you're taking the right dosage.

Evidence about diet and arthritis

People with gout may find that avoiding certain foods, in combination with gout medication, may prevent a gout attack.

However, there's no substantial scientific evidence that other forms of arthritis can be improved or alleviated by avoiding certain foods. Specifically, there's no real evidence that any of the following trigger or aggravate symptoms:

- acidic foods – e.g. lemons, oranges, tomatoes
- nightshade foods - e.g. tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and eggplants
- dairy foods.

They all contain important nutrients so not eating them may cause other health problems. Speak with a dietitian first before excluding certain foods.

Tips for managing your diet

- eat a well-balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables, protein foods, dairy, cereals and grains. This will give you all the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients you need for general good health and weight control.
- ensure you have enough calcium in your diet for strong bones and to reduce the risk of osteoporosis in later life.
- drink plenty of water.
- include more omega-3 fatty acids in your diet.
- eat fresh foods and avoid processed foods and sugary drinks.
- keep your weight within the normal range - excess bodyweight increases stress on joints, especially weight-bearing joints like knees and hips.
- consider keeping a food diary. If you suspect a particular food aggravates your condition, keep a diary of what you eat and your symptoms. After a month you may learn what foods could be causing problems. Discuss these results with your doctor or a dietitian.
- don't cut whole food groups from your diet – for example all dairy products – without talking to your doctor as this may deprive you of important vitamins and minerals.
- be aware - the symptoms of arthritis, particularly the inflammatory types, can change for no apparent reason. Don't assume it's diet related. Talk your health professional first.
- go to a doctor or a dietitian for professional advice. Avoid conflicting information online and in the media about arthritis and diet.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitian
- Nutritionist
- Musculoskeletal Australia
www.msk.org.au
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line on 1800 263 265 to speak to our nurses or email helpline@msk.org.au

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- how to live well with these
- managing pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Eat for Health - Australian Dietary Guidelines
www.eatforhealth.gov.au
- Dietitians Association of Australia
<http://daa.asn.au>
- Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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Australian Guide to Healthy Eating

Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from these five food groups every day.
Drink plenty of water.

Grain (cereal) foods,
mostly wholegrain
and/or high cereal
fibre varieties



Vegetables and
legumes/beans



Lean meats and
poultry, fish, eggs,
tofu, nuts and seeds
and legumes/beans



Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or
alternatives, mostly reduced fat



Fruit



Use small amounts



Only sometimes and in small amounts



