

# Diet and Arthritis



## Advice from the Queen Mary's Sidcup Rheumatology department

A great deal has been written about the effects of diet on various types of arthritis. Some of the books that you may find in the local library are full of common sense; some are, unfortunately, little more than mumbo-jumbo. Many of the diets are recommended on the basis of individual case histories. Very few diet regimes have been tested in clinical trials, and those that have been properly tested have mostly proved to have no benefit. Indeed, if one was to put together every diet recommendation ever made, patients would only be allowed a very limited repertoire of foods – rice, chicken, lentils and water!

Why might food exclusion work? We know that patients with joint inflammation have a disturbance of their immune system. So, if they eat something to which they are truly allergic, their immune system may not produce just the antibodies to the food, but be a little less specific and produce more of the antibodies that make the arthritis active.

Many patients with arthritis swear by their diets, and this leaflet contains some of the elements of testing for food “sensitivity”.

Eating a diet that excludes a number of foods can get very boring. It may also be inconvenient, especially if the family want to eat “normal” food. Then the sufferer has to have specially prepared meals, and this can be a fag.

If you are going to try and find out whether you (and your arthritis) are sensitive to foods, you need first to avoid them for two weeks, and then to re-introduce them to your diet and see if your arthritis flares up. Do this for each group of foods, one group at a time.

### **Group 1 : Milk Products**

Milk, cream, yoghurt, butter, cheese and all other dairy products.

### **Group 2 : Wheat products**

Bread, cakes, breakfast cereals, biscuits, pasta, anything containing wheat flour. Rye, oat and rice products are allowed (eg pure rye flour bread, Rice Krispies or Porage Oats).

### **Group 3 : Red Meats**

Beef, lamb, offal. Chicken or turkey and fish are allowed. It's probably best also to avoid veal and pork (this includes sausages).

### **Group 4 : Products containing caffeine**

Coffee, tea, chocolate, cola drinks and Lucozade

### **Group 5 : (Most boring!) Alcohol**

Wine, spirits, beer

Note: there is no evidence that avoiding acid foods (such as citrus fruits) is helpful.

## ***Pick a group***

And avoid *everything* in it for two weeks. Then restart. If your arthritis gets worse, then you might consider continuing to avoid that group.

## ***Then pick another group***

And do the same. Continue until you have worked your way through all the groups. *Remember that you may not feel better while you are avoiding the particular group of foods. The test is— do you feel worse when you re-start?*

It may well be that at the end of your experiments you decide that there are certain things you should avoid. Most people however find the benefits are marginal. They are usually not worth the hard work of sticking to the diet and cooking once for the family and once more for the arthritis sufferer.

## **Special oils and dietary supplements**

The virtues of cod liver oil and oil of evening primrose have been widely publicised. There is no really good evidence that either is very helpful, though there is some evidence to support claims for both. The results of more research are awaited. Neither of them will do any harm, taken in moderation.

The green lipped mussel extract does not appear to have any benefit.

A recent addition to the list of “recommended” additives is glucosamine with or without chondroitin sulfate. It is sold as a natural substance which if taken can build up cartilage strength. Originally this was quite expensive; now it is much cheaper, and although there is no good experimental evidence to support its use it does not appear to do any harm. However recent research suggests that the quantity actually reaching the bloodstream from taking this by mouth is far too small to have any possibility of influence on joints.

Most normal diets contain enough vitamins for the average person, and vitamin supplements are not necessary.

Quite a lot of people with rheumatoid arthritis get anaemic. Sometimes this is due to the disease itself, but often the drugs we use for treatment can cause bleeding from the gut. Your doctor may well check your blood count regularly and may recommend a course of iron tablets. Sometimes however people with rheumatoid arthritis do not absorb iron very well; they may need to have the iron given by injection.

It is very wise to keep your weight under control. We reckon that if you are taking steroids by mouth you will put on half a stone or so unless you are careful. Less weight means less strain on the joints!

**In summary:**

**Eat well, eat moderately!**

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