



Diet

- Arthritis is a general term that refers to over 150 different conditions that affect the muscles, bones and joints
- No special diet or 'miracle food' can cure arthritis, but some conditions may be helped by making changes to your diet

Arthritis is a general term that refers to over 150 different conditions. The accurate term for this group of conditions is musculoskeletal conditions, as they affect the muscles, bones and/or joints.

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

Some conditions may be helped by making changes to your diet. For example, people with inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis seem to benefit from an increased intake of omega-3 fats, found in oily fish such as sardines and salmon, while people with gout may benefit from avoiding foods high in purines, including offal, shellfish and beer, and drinking plenty of water.

Healthy eating

Your body works best when you eat a wide range of healthy foods. Most people find that they feel better if they eat a balanced and varied diet to get all the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and other nutrients your body needs.

Eating a balanced diet and having an adequate fluid intake can also help provide you with better energy levels, help to maintain your weight, and give you a greater sense of wellbeing which may improve your symptoms.

Always seek the advice of your doctor or dietitian before changing your diet. You may be restricting your food intake unnecessarily or taking too much of certain products (such as mineral supplements) that may have no impact on your condition at all. Some supplements may also interact with your medication.

Maintain a healthy weight

If you're overweight or obese, the extra load on your joints may be making your arthritis symptoms worse, especially if you have arthritis in your hips, knees, feet or spine. There's also a clear link between being overweight and an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis.

To lose excess weight you must also be active, but this can be difficult for people with arthritis due to pain, fatigue or stiffness. If you need to lose weight, talk with your doctor, dietitian or health professional for information and advice on healthy eating and how to exercise 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 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.

It's important that you don't confuse fish oils with fish liver oils (such as cod liver oil and halibut liver oil). Fish liver oils also contain vitamin A. Large amounts of vitamin A can cause serious side effects.

Ask your doctor before taking any supplements, to make sure you're taking the correct dosage.

Gout and diet

Gout occurs when uric acid, a normal waste product, builds up in your bloodstream and forms crystals in a joint, such as the big toe, causing inflammation and pain.

It's believed that lowering uric acid levels through small changes in your diet may help reduce the chance of future gout attacks.

These changes include:

- restrict or avoid alcohol
- avoid binge drinking
- restrict or avoid offal meats, e.g. liver, kidneys, brains
- restrict or avoid shellfish, e.g. prawns and scallops
- restrict or avoid some seafood, including sardines, herrings, mackerel and anchovies
- restrict or avoid products containing yeast—e.g. beer and Vegemite
- drink plenty of water
- avoid fasting or crash dieting
- make sure you don't overeat on a regular basis.

Your doctor or dietitian can help guide you in making healthy changes to your diet.

It's important to note that dietary changes alone aren't enough to address the underlying cause of gout - too much uric acid in your blood. You also need to continue to take any medication your doctor has prescribed to manage your gout.

Glucosamine and chondroitin

The supplements glucosamine and chondroitin are popular – yet evidence about their effectiveness in treating arthritis is very limited.

Some studies show that glucosamine sulphate and chondroitin, taken either separately or in combination, may improve pain slightly for people with osteoarthritis. There is no evidence that these supplements are effective for any other forms of arthritis.

Glucosamine and chondroitin may interact with other medication, including warfarin, and should only be taken after consultation with your doctor.

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 or musculoskeletal conditions can be improved or alleviated by avoiding particular foods.

There is no conclusive evidence that:

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

trigger or aggravate the symptoms associated with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions.

These foods all contain important nutrients and avoiding them may cause other health problems.

People who have an intolerance to certain foods have found that excluding it from their diet can make them feel better overall. However it's unclear how this affects arthritis symptoms.

If you're thinking of excluding foods from your diet, speak with a dietitian to make sure you're not eliminating important nutrients.

Tips for managing your diet

- eat a well-balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables, protein foods, dairy, cereals and grains to get all the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and other nutrients your body needs. This will help to maintain general good health and a healthy weight.
- ensure you have adequate dietary calcium to reduce the risk of osteoporosis in later life.
- drink plenty of water.
- include more omega-3 fatty acids in your diet.
- keep your weight within the normal range - excess bodyweight increases stress on joints, especially weight-bearing joints like knees and hips.

- keep a food diary - if you think a particular food may aggravate your condition, it can help to keep a diary of your food intake and symptoms. After a month, you may have some idea about which foods could be provoking symptoms. 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 you may miss out on important vitamins and minerals.
- be aware - the symptoms of arthritis, particularly the inflammatory types, can change for no apparent reason. Don't assume any improvement in your symptoms is due to what you eat or changes in your diet. Be guided by your health professional.
- seek advice - if you need help talk with your doctor or a dietitian. There's a lot of conflicting information online and in the media about arthritis and diet. If you need some guidance, talk with a professional.

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 and speak to our nurses.
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your 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



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