

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

Call our National Help Line on 1800 263 265

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, 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 diet full of cereals, fresh fruits and vegetables and choose foods that are low in fats, salt and sugar.

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 your affected joints include those of the hip, knee, 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 be active, but this can be difficult for people with arthritis due to pain or stiffness. See your doctor, dietitian or health professional for information and advice.

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.



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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

Uric acid is a waste product that is normally excreted from the body in urine. Gout is a type of arthritis characterised by the build-up of uric acid in the joints (such as the big toe), which causes 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, such as 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 non-alcoholic fluids
- avoid fasting or crash dieting
- make sure you don't overeat on a regular basis
- take your time when eating.

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

Glucosamine and chondroitin

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

Studies show that glucosamine and chondroitin, taken either separately or in combination, may relieve pain for people with osteoarthritis where there has been a breakdown of cartilage. 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

Gout can be helped by avoiding some foods.

However, there's no substantial scientific evidence that other forms of arthritis can be improved or alleviated by avoiding particular foods.

There is no 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 muscle, bone and joint 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. This will help to maintain general good health and a healthy weight



- **increase dietary calcium** to reduce the risk of osteoporosis in later life
- **drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids**, especially water
- **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 food 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
- *MOVE muscle, bone & joint health*
National Help Line: 1800 263 265

Things to remember

- Arthritis is a general term that refers to over 150 different conditions that affect the muscles, bones and joints
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This information has been produced in consultation with and approved by: MOVE muscle, bone & joint health Ltd.

How we can help

Call our National Help Line and speak to our nurses
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@move.org.au

Visit our website move.org.au for information on:

- muscle, bone and joint conditions
- ways to live well with a muscle, bone and joint condition
- our new resource *Managing your pain: An A-Z guide*
- programs and services
- peer support groups
- 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





Australian Government
National Health and Medical Research Council
Department of Health and Ageing

www.eatforhealth.gov.au

Australian Guide to Healthy Eating

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

Drink plenty of water.



Use small amounts



Only sometimes and in small amounts



Image source: National Health and Medical Research Council

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