

Oh, My Aching Joints

Quell the swell of arthritis and other joint ailments with diet, exercise and natural supplements.

When it hits, joint pain can change a person's life. Suddenly, standing up from a seated position is torture, working in the garden or handwriting a letter, impossible.

Joint pain affects people young and old in debilitating ways. Nearly one out of three U.S. adults lives with some type of arthritic condition, according to the 2007 Johns Hopkins White Paper: Arthritis. Results include soreness, stiffness and inflammation of the fingers, knees, elbows, hips and other joints in the body.

For years, pharmaceutical and over-the-counter medications were the treatment of choice for millions of Americans suffering from joint pain. Then the news hit about how harmful many of these meds—particularly the COX-2 (cyclooxygenase-2) inhibitor drugs like Vioxx—are to the cardiovascular and gastrointestinal systems.

Rather than douse their pain with dangerous drugs, joint pain sufferers are learning that they can safely use natural remedies to relieve the symptoms triggered by joint ailments. Here's an overview of how using supplements and diet and lifestyle changes can help relieve joint pain.

Discover the Ailment

Arthritis is an umbrella term that covers more than 100 different conditions—some more serious than others. Osteoarthritis, caused by the breakdown of cartilage surrounding the joints, is the most common form of arthritis, affecting millions of older Americans. "If you're in your 50s, 60s or 70s and the pain is consistent and mostly in your fingers, then the cause is likely osteoarthritis," says Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum author of *Pain Free 1-2-3*.

Muscle pain can cause joint-related problems, too. "If the muscles get shortened anywhere in the body such as in your back or hands, the pain can mimic arthritis," says Teitelbaum. "If a person aches all over and has joint pain, most likely the cause is fibromyalgia or another type of muscle pain issue. This is the most common cause of joint pain in younger people."

Other causes of joint pain include repetitive stress injuries, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disorder that results in hot, swollen joints. Even food allergies can aggravate arthritic symptoms, Teitelbaum says.

Because joint pain can have so many different causes—some more serious than others—it's important to determine what is stoking the pain and then treat the problem, Teitelbaum says. If left untreated, many joint-related ailments can lead to loss of mobility, permanent joint deformities and obliteration of the protective cartilage surrounding the joints.

Douse the flames

Inflammation is at the root of all forms of arthritis, as well as of fibromyalgia and many other conditions that trigger joint soreness and stiffness.

One important step toward eliminating joint pain is to avoid foods that stoke the fires of inflammation while indulging in the healthier options that douse the flames.

The omega-6 fats found in fried and processed foods (called trans fats) and red meats and dairy

products (saturated fats) should be avoided because they increase the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. Omega-3 fats, on the other hand, found in fish, flaxseeds and walnuts are actually anti-inflammatory.

“Our body’s armies of inflammation are often on high alert when they don’t have to be,” writes Teitelbaum in *Pain Free 1-2-3*. “Much of this occurs because of the high amounts of animal fats relative to fish and vegetable oils in our diets. Over the last few hundred years, we have markedly decreased anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids and increased pro-inflammatory omega-6 fats in our diet. This often results in our bodies being in inflammatory overdrive.”

The omega-3 found in fish oil is particularly beneficial for quelling joint pain and inflammation. Teitelbaum recommends that people eat three servings of salmon, herring, tuna or another cold-water fish each week. Fish oil supplementation is an option for people who don’t eat fish or who need a higher dose. To ease joint-related pain, take about 2 grams of omega-3 daily.

Sugar and refined carbohydrates are another no-no for joint pain sufferers, Teitelbaum says, because these foods also set off a chain reaction of oxidation and inflammation in the body. Instead, choose whole grain breads and lots fruits and vegetables high in antioxidants, such as raspberries, broccoli and spinach.

Move past the pain

As unpleasant as it may initially sound to someone with osteoarthritis or another joint-related ailment, movement and exercise is crucial for getting past the pain. That’s because controlled exercise actually decreases inflammation and helps reduce excess weight, which can exacerbate joint pain.

A recent study published in the journal *Arthritis Research Therapy* found that exercise helps reduce and even prevent the aches associated with osteoarthritis. Women in the study ages 72 to 79 who did even small amounts of exercise—only an hour and fifteen minutes per week—reduced their chances of developing arthritis symptoms by 28 percent. Those who exercised for two-and-a-half hours weekly lowered their risk by 46 percent.

Swimming, yoga, Tai Chi and other gentle forms of exercise can all help increase range of motion and flexibility for joint pain sufferers. For people with arthritis in their knees or hips, cycling has been shown to stimulate the cartilage cells and strengthen the structures around the joints, according to a 1999 article in the *Journals of Gerontology*. No matter the exercise, it helps to start slow and stretch after each workout.

Along with exercise, Teitelbaum recommends using heat therapy to sooth aching joints. To treat painful, stiff fingers at home, he advises microwaving an herbal bean bag for one minute and then wrapping it around the fingers for 20 minutes. “As the heat seeps in, your range of motion and ability to move your fingers will increase,” he says.

Natural relief

Joint pain has been a major target for the pharmaceutical companies. But for people wanting a safer, gentler approach to pain relief, Mother Nature has the answer. Teitelbaum recommends the following supplements to help eliminate the joint pain and inflammation:

- **Glucosamine sulfate:** This cartilage-building compound helps decrease inflammation and prevent joint deterioration. Recommended dose: 750 mg twice daily.
- **MSM:** This natural form of sulfur has been found to help reduce pain and swelling in arthritic joints, particularly when taken in combination with glucosamine. Recommended dose: 2,500 mg daily.
- **Chondroitin:** Often taken in conjunction with glucosamine, chondroitin helps maintain cartilage

elasticity and transport nutrients to the joints. Recommended dose: 1,200 mg daily.

- **Willow Bark:** Salicin, the active ingredient in willow bark, has been found to be effective at reducing osteoarthritis and back pain. Willow bark also acts as a COX-2 inhibitor to decrease inflammation. Recommended dose: 80 mg salicin three times daily. (Teitelbaum warns against using a willow bark supplement that doesn't disclose its salicin content.)
- **Boswellia (Boswellia serrata):** Studies have shown that boswellia, also known as frankincense, helps ease the pain and inflammation associated with both rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Recommended dose: 350 mg three times daily.

Many of these supplements take six weeks to six months to reach effectiveness. "Prescription medications work fast, but they poison the system," says Teitelbaum. "The natural remedies take longer because they are rebuilding the system. With arthritis medications, the arthritis gets worse. But with natural remedies, the body begins to heal."

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