

Alternative Arthritis Remedies Go Mainstream

Those seeking relief from the pain, stiffness and inflammation of arthritis are not alone. A recent survey reveals that half of the 43 million Americans with arthritis have lost faith in conventional remedies. With no cure in sight, it is not surprising that two-thirds of sufferers have tried alternative treatments like diet, vitamins, and herbs.

For chronic diseases such as arthritis, the benefits from certain dietary changes and some supplements may outweigh the risks, says William J. Arnold, M.D., a rheumatologist and chair of the Arthritis Foundation's Task Force on Complementary and Alternative Therapies.

Following is a look at some promising therapies:

- Glucosamine is one-half of the "arthritis cure" popularized by a 1997 book. A growing body of evidence supports its role in relieving pain, swelling and tenderness of Osteoarthritis (OA). Researchers are optimistic about glucosamine's ability to relieve symptoms as effectively as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, but without the serious gastrointestinal side-effects. In addition, glucosamine may also halt the breakdown of cartilage.
- Chondroitin is the other half of the "arthritis cure". This substance acts as a "liquid magnet," drawing fluid into cartilage, making it spongy and protecting it from destructive enzymes. Yet, there is no clear clinical evidence to support the theory that chondroitin rebuilds cartilage. Chondroitin is also expensive.
- Glucosamine/Chondroitin Combo – In his 1997 book, *The Arthritis Cure*, and in *Maximizing the Arthritis Cure*, Jason Theodosakis, MD, a sports and preventive medicine specialist at the University of Arizona in Tucson, advocates a combination of these two substances to treat OA. He speculates that the two together have a synergistic effect. The National Institutes of Health recently launched a study to determine the short-term effectiveness and safety of glucosamine and chondroitin, both individually and in combination.
- SAM-e or S-adenosylmethionine is a substance that occurs naturally in the body. Researchers believe supplemental amounts relieve pain and improve joint mobility by increasing cartilage thickness. However, like chondroitin, this supplement is very expensive.
- Antioxidant Vitamins and Minerals - Antioxidant nutrients like vitamins C and E, beta carotene and the mineral selenium may offer some protection to joints. People with OA who eat an antioxidant-rich diet, especially one high in Vitamin C, may reduce cartilage loss and slow disease progression.
- Vitamin D – It has long been known that inadequate Vitamin D can lead to rickets and other bone problems. A Boston University study showed that older people with low D intakes and low blood levels of D were three times more likely to experience worsening of OA of the knee.
- Omega-3 Fatty Acids – found in fish, canola oil, flaxseed and avocado may be protective. More than 20 clinical trials have described improvement in tender joints, fatigability, and morning stiffness in people taking fish oil supplements.
- GLA – Certain oils – black current oil, borage seed oil and evening primrose oil, all contain gammalinolenic acid (GLA), an omega-6 fatty acid that acts more like Omega-3. The studies vary on showing a benefit from GLA.

Arthritis Diets – There is a slew of dietary advice for arthritis sufferers. However, there is no proven miracle diet or cure. If you simply eat right – lots of fruits and vegetables and whole grains, plus maintain a healthy weight, you can probably alleviate some arthritis symptoms. Not only is being overweight a strain on the joints, but people with arthritis often become sedentary as a result of their limited mobility. Exercise can be beneficial, helping to maintain weight and reduce stiffness.

Herbal Remedies – Many herbal remedies recommended to alleviate arthritis may not be familiar to westerners. Turmeric contains the yellow pigment curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. When mixed with Boswellia, a gum from an Asian tree, and zinc, it has been shown in test tube and animal studies to inhibit prostaglandins that trigger inflammation.

The bottom line is that people with arthritis need to be especially vigilant when assessing the benefits of alternative remedies. Since the chronic symptoms of arthritis typically wax and wane over time, it is difficult to tell what has actually helped.

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