

Joint Resolution

Fend off the painful, degenerative effects of arthritis with the right food choices



When 28-year-old

Jean Magnuson gave birth to her first child, she never dreamed that just a few months later she'd be celebrating Mother's Day at the Mayo Clinic. Yet that's exactly where the Sioux Falls, S.D., native found herself, undergoing endless medical tests in hope of finding a cure for her sudden and crippling illness: rheumatoid arthritis.

Within weeks of giving birth, Magnuson noticed that her knuckles had swollen to twice their normal size, her wrists were bulging with nodules, and the pain in her knees and feet was excruciating. The only help for her condition, she was told, was potent pharmaceuticals. Even though they offered just mild relief, Magnuson took them. After she had spent a year on gold injections and corticosteroids, her physician told her he believed she

would have to take them indefinitely. Worse yet, the toxicity of the drugs meant it would be unsafe for her to conceive a child. The news was more than she could handle. Angry and tearful—and determined to be a mother again—she vowed to find a better way to fight her arthritis.

Magnuson stopped the injections and gradually weaned herself off the steroids. Drug-free, but not well, Magnuson began researching alternative treatments, ultimately seeking the care of a naturopath at the Chicago Holistic Center. There she learned that two basics—diet and exercise—were the path to controlling the disease. She also learned which foods caused inflammation and promptly eliminated them from her diet. Despite the pain, she did gentle yoga every morning. Within a month, she

could walk across a room without a cane and slice fruit effortlessly. Today, seven years after starting her whole-foods diet and exercise regime, Magnuson is raising three children, has returned to school for a degree in elementary education and says she feels better than most people who've never had arthritis.

A WIDESPREAD ILLNESS

The progression of Magnuson's rheumatoid arthritis was extremely rapid, and yet her case is not unique. More than 2 million Americans have the disease and another 21 million suffer from osteoarthritis, according to the Arthritis Foundation. These two types are the most common among the more than 100 varieties of arthritis, which also include fibromyalgia, gout and lupus. The bad news is, the numbers appear to be on the rise, especially as the population ages and continues to eat the standard American diet, replete with saturated, inflammation-causing animal fats and lacking in nutrients.

Yet rheumatoid arthritis isn't just a disease of the elderly—it most commonly hits people between the ages of 20 and 40. Osteoarthritis is the loss of joint cartilage from wear and tear or injury. "Anyone who played a contact sport in high school or college probably will get arthritis by age 30," says Michael Loes, M.D., director of the Arizona Pain Institute in Phoenix and co-author of *Arthritis: The Doctor's Cure* (Keats, 1998).

The news about arthritis isn't all dismal, however. Nutritional research is turning up new information on whole foods, dietary supplements and herbal remedies every day. (See "Foods That Fight Arthritis Pain," p. 21.) "The body is a better healer than physicians will ever be," Loes says. The key is maintaining nutritional balance to treat and even prevent arthritis.

THE MYSTERY OF AUTOIMMUNITY

Rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory autoimmune disease that affects the whole body but primarily attacks the joints. Doctors believe it occurs when the body's immune system turns against itself and starts to damage joint tissues. Why this happens is a mystery, but diet appears to be one of the best methods of treating it. Women in their 20s through 40s are three times more likely than men to develop rheumatoid arthritis, in which joints stiffen or swell with fluid. Secondary symptoms include fatigue, weakness and weight loss. Conventional drug treatments usually bring some relief of pain, but often produce serious side effects. Common drug therapies include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen; corticosteroids; and cytotoxic agents that suppress the immune system. Among the possible side effects from these treatments are nausea, stomach irritation, bone loss, headaches, hypertension and increased risk of infection.

In contrast, a natural approach to rheumatoid arthritis addresses digestion and food allergies, two factors associated with the disease. "I've seen people get pain relief by identifying aggravating foods in their diet and eliminating them," says naturopath Lauri Aesoph, N.D., of Sioux Falls, S.D., and the author of *How to Eat Away Arthritis* (Prentice Hall, 1996).

Arthritis isn't caused simply by eating nutrient-poor junk foods. Actually, Aesoph explains, eating too many processed foods paves the way for food allergies, which may trigger the immune system to attack joint tissue. Also implicated is a condition called leaky gut syndrome, in which undigested molecules of food escape from a weakened intestinal lining into the blood and produce an autoimmune response. "I've seen the most profound changes in a person's health and pain relief from diet alone," says Aesoph, who also recommends free-radical-fighting antioxidants to patients trying to prevent or treat arthritis. Vitamins A, C and E and minerals zinc and selenium are important because arthritis' inflammation creates free radicals, which further damage body tissues. "The tough part is getting people to follow through with it."

Jean Magnuson credits her success to having systematically eliminated certain foods from her diet to pinpoint which ones were troublesome. In the process she discovered that she was sensitive to wheat, dairy products and eggs and stopped eating these, as well as foods from the "nightshade"

Foods That Fight Arthritis Pain

If you have osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia or gout, you can reduce joint pain and stiffness with healing foods, says Lauri Aesoph, N.D., in her book *How to Eat Away Arthritis* (Prentice Hall, 1996). Here is her Top 10 list.*

1 Cherries and berries: Antioxidant compounds that protect cartilage, tendons and joints are particularly abundant in strawberries, blueberries and cranberries. Eat a half-pound of fresh cherries and berries daily.

2 Omega-3 fatty acids: Walnut, primrose, borage, grapeseed and flaxseed oils. Take one tablespoon daily.

3 Fruits and vegetables: High in fiber, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. Eat at least five servings daily.

4 Garlic: Acts as an antibiotic and anti-inflammatory. Season food with fresh garlic or take odorless garlic capsules daily.

5 Ginger: Inhibits pain-producing prostaglandins. Spice up dishes with fresh ginger or take capsules or tincture daily.

6 Green tea: Contains polyphenols that fight oxidation in arthritic joints. Drink up to five cups daily.

7 Hot peppers: Loaded with antioxidants, peppers—including paprika, jalapeño and cayenne—are anti-inflammatory and analgesic. Use regularly in cooking. Capsicum topical cream is also available.

8 Papaya and pineapple: Contain protein-digesting enzymes papain and bromelain, which are anti-inflammatory. Eat fresh when possible or take in tablet form.

9 Shiitake mushroom: Boosts immunity. Add to soups, casseroles, stir-fries and salads regularly.

10 Turmeric: Orange-colored spice reduces inflammation. Sprinkle liberally on food or take curcumin supplement daily.

*Obviously, if you are allergic to any of these foods, avoid them.

family—tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and peppers—which are believed to contribute to inflammation and inhibit joint repair. In addition, she converted to an all-organic diet free of sugars, dyes and preservatives and drank lots of purified water to flush out toxins. "Changing my diet was hard," she admits. "Once, when I realized I couldn't eat bagels or ice cream anymore, I cried at the supermarket."

"A healthy vegetarian diet also helps fight arthritis progression because it is naturally low in arachidonic acid from animal fats, which exacerbate inflammation," explains Loes. "Oils like walnut, flaxseed, primrose, borage and grapeseed can actually decrease pain and swelling. And stock up on B complex vitamins, which are often lacking in people with arthritis." Maintaining strong bones is another part of the equation. In fact, many people with arthritic diseases have severe calcium deficiencies, says Aesoph. If your body needs

calcium but doesn't get enough through your diet, it leaches the mineral from your skeleton. Worse yet, the calcium may then be deposited in arthritic joints. To prevent this, eat foods such as dark green leafy vegetables, fresh fruits and whole grains that are high in bone-building calcium and its partner needed for proper absorption, magnesium. Vitamin D, also required for the body to utilize calcium, is manufactured in the body when you get a brief dose of sunshine. (Ten minutes a day, without sunscreen, is plenty.)

Some botanicals may boost your healing capability as well. "Bromelain and papain enzymes [from pineapple and papaya, respectively] are potent anti-inflammatory agents that may reduce joint swelling in cases where long-term use of steroids has not," adds Loes. He also recommends ginger and turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), two additional inflammation fighters available as culinary spices or in capsules. Check with

your natural health practitioner to see how these supplements might fit into your health regimen.

AVOID THE DAILY GRIND

Most people take their joints for granted—until pain, stiffness, creaking or enlargement raise the warning flag of osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis and one typically associated with aging. While more than 80 percent of people over 55 do have the disease, so do two out of every three people 35 and older. Osteoarthritis is diagnosed by X-ray, which can reveal narrowed joint spaces, cartilage erosion, bone spurs and even a bony overgrowth surrounding joints that restricts motion and triggers pain. There are two types of this condition. There's primary osteoarthritis, which normally appears in one's 50s or 60s, when the body is less able to repair cartilage damaged by normal wear and tear. Secondary

Rheumatoid arthritis is not just a disease of the elderly.

osteoarthritis is often the result of an injury or structural imbalances in the body that overstress joints.

Technically, aging doesn't cause osteoarthritis. "It just sets the stage for it," says Luke Bucci, Ph.D., author of *Healing Arthritis the Natural Way* (Summit, 1995). "Surprisingly, the first stages of osteoarthritis develop during the second decade of your life," says Larry Frieder, D.C., a chiropractor in Boulder, Colo. Injuries ranging from a fall off a playground swing to a car accident are enough to start arthritis formation, he notes. "I treat many young adults who have neck or lower back pain related to a past injury but didn't receive any physical therapy.


"Here's an analogy," he continues. "When your car is out of alignment for months, the tires wear unevenly. In the body, if your musculoskeletal alignment is off, joint cartilage wears unevenly." The person most at risk for this type of arthritis, he says, is the weekend warrior—the person who's not in peak athletic condition and therefore prone to injury—who allows the injury to heal without getting bodywork or physical therapy. Incomplete healing then

leads to restricted muscle and joint motion. Correcting musculoskeletal imbalances with bodywork can actually prevent osteoarthritis. Chiropractic adjustments and massage normalize and balance musculoskeletal function, and physical therapy uses exercises to retrain weak and injured muscles to work more efficiently and in concert with stronger muscles. On top of that, ultrasound treatment, consisting of tiny electrical pulses, stimulates muscles and increases blood flow to an injury. Getting orthotic inserts in your shoes can correct postural imbalances that contribute to knee or hip arthritis. To prevent osteoarthritis, have all injuries, aches and pains evaluated by a professional. In addition, regular, moderate exercise—preferably low impact—assures healthy joints.

NATURAL PAIN REDUCERS

The conventional prescription for osteoarthritis is NSAIDs, which reduce swelling and pain but don't promote healing. In fact, long-term doses of NSAIDs may actually inhibit cartilage repair, increase joint deterioration and lead to stomach irritation, increased bleeding and impaired kidney function. "Relying too heavily on NSAIDs for pain is like wrapping cotton around your smoke alarm so you can't hear it go off," says Frieder. "Pain is a signal that something is wrong and it should alert you to take care of the problem."

Turning to natural methods is one way of alleviating pain while allowing the body to heal itself. Unfortunately, two of the more promising treatments come from animal sources: supplemental glucosamine sulfate, derived from chitin, a tissue found in shellfish; and chondroitin, which comes from refined fish or animal cartilage. Vegetarians can turn to extracts from an Ayurvedic herb, *Boswellia serrata*, which have shown good results in reducing inflammation and improving blood supply to the joint tissues. These extracts, known as boswellic acids, reduce symptoms in both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, according to a study published in 1991.

As researchers search for better drug therapies for arthritis, it is important to remember that for many people, the best treatment—and prevention—is the simplest and oldest: Eat well, respect your body and look to nature for remedies to help with the symptoms that arise. 

Laurel Kallenbach is a freelance health and travel writer from Boulder, Colo.