

whole
health

Joint Care

by Julia Tolliver Maranan

A holistic plan for joint care is safer than the usual drug therapy and may work just as well

Joint pain is the most frustrating of health conditions, limiting everyday activities and simple comfort for otherwise perfectly healthy people of every age. So when the most popular medications, called COX-2 inhibitors, came under scrutiny from the Food and Drug Administration last fall, millions of people with joint pain let out a collective moan. But many of them also learned something: There are natural, effective approaches for those who don't wish to use pharmaceuticals.



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After studies linked the COX-2 inhibitors to increased risk of heart problems, the makers of Vioxx and Bextra pulled the drugs off the market in September and April, respectively. The FDA has urged doctors to recommend alternatives to another, Celebrex. Long-term use of pain relievers such as ibuprofen and aspirin can lead to gastrointestinal problems, while another, naproxen, may lead to heart trouble.

The holistic approach combines lifestyle commitments and natural remedies to help ease joint pain without side effects, whether your pain stems from a temporary ailment such as tendinitis or bursitis (inflammation and swelling of the soft tissues around your joints), or a chronic condition such as osteoarthritis (a breakdown of cartilage in the joint itself). The evidence says that following these steps seem to work best.

Step 1

revamp your diet

Making certain smart food choices can pay healthy dividends for joints from fingers to toes. Doing so can also lead to weight loss, which tends to be beneficial. Every pound of extra weight you carry translates into three additional pounds of pressure on your knees and hips, so losing even a few pounds can take a significant load off those hardworking hinges. In fact, one study found that women who lost an average of 11 pounds lowered their risk of knee osteoarthritis (OA) by 50 percent.

Eat more good fats. Omega-3 fatty acids and monounsaturated fats like canola and olive oil soothe inflammation. Sources of omega-3s include salmon, walnuts, flaxseed, and fortified eggs.

Eat foods with vitamin D. This nutrient protects against hip OA, according to a 1999 study published in the journal *Arthritis & Rheumatism*. Fortified milk and breakfast cereals are good sources, as are tuna, salmon, and mackerel.

Consume a variety of produce. A wide assortment of fruits and vegetables means a broad range of antioxidants,

which fight free radicals, the extraneous molecules that have been shown to contribute to inflammation.

Enjoy ginger and turmeric. These spices have anti-inflammatory properties; use them liberally in cooking.

Avoid bad fats. Partially hydrogenated oils and vegetable oils high in polyunsaturates trigger inflammation and can exacerbate joint pain.

Step 2

try natural remedies

Research backs a number of remedies that may ease the pain of OA and other joint problems. They have very few side effects, but check with your health-care practitioner before taking them.

Glucosamine and chondroitin. The evidence indicates that both glucosamine sulfate and chondroitin sulfate, natural substances found in cartilage cells, reduce mild to moderate OA pain; some evidence suggests that the supplements may also help repair cartilage and stop joint degeneration. It can take two to three months to notice improvement. Avoid chondroitin supplements made from shark cartilage, which may contain heavy metals.

Ginger and turmeric. These natural anti-inflammatories are available as supplements. A number of studies show that ginger and turmeric can ease OA symptoms and reduce inflammation, respectively.

SAME supplements. A recent study indicates that SAME, a naturally occurring compound, relieves OA pain as effectively as drugs such as ibuprofen. More research is needed to check a theory that it can repair cartilage as well. When shopping, look for enteric-coated SAME products labeled “butanedisulfonate,” which is more stable than other forms of SAME.

Boswellia, or frankincense. A 2003 study in the journal *Phytomedicine* found that subjects taking an extract of this anti-inflammatory herb (known by either name) had decreased knee pain and greater range of motion.

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Acupuncture

What it is: Practitioners insert fine needles at points on your body that correspond to painful areas.

How it works: The needles stimulate and balance the flow of energy, or *qi*. The treatments may also trigger the release of endorphins and other pain-killing neurotransmitters.

The evidence: A 2004 study at the University of Maryland found that acupuncture reduces pain from knee OA.

Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method

What they are: Learning new ways of moving to correct bad posture or muscle tension or misuse.

How they work: Both teach you to move efficiently and align your body correctly, which may lessen pain and improve range of motion.

The evidence: Preliminary evidence from studies in the U.K. and Sweden suggests both may help with joint pain.

Massage Therapy

What it is: Stroking or rubbing your muscles to relieve tension.

How it works: Massage encourages blood flow to joints and stimulates the release of endorphins.

The evidence: Multiple studies confirm that massage may ease pain, according to a review published in *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2003.

Mind/Body Practices

What they are: Practices such as bio-feedback, meditation, breath work, and guided imagery help you sense and influence the connection between your mental state and physical health.

How they work: They help reduce stress, which contributes to pain.

The evidence: An analysis of studies by Germany's Freiburg Institute for Mindfulness Research indicate these practices can minimize stress and pain.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

What it is: Electrical impulses stimulate the nerve endings near painful joints.

How it works: The electrical impulses may block pain signals and encourage the release of endorphins.

The evidence: A 2003 study published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found that TENS lowered knee pain from OA.

Two studies published in *Arthritis & Rheumatism* showed that an herbal formula containing boswellia, along with ginger, turmeric, and the Ayurvedic herb ashwagandha, measurably reduced osteoarthritis pain.

Capsaicin. The substance that makes hot peppers hot also provides pain relief. Look for topical creams containing 0.025 to 0.075 percent capsaicin.

Step 3 get physical

Regular exercise protects and stabilizes joints, nourishes cartilage, and increases range of motion. Start with low-intensity activities that don't aggravate your joints; ask your health-care practitioner, a physical therapist, or a personal trainer what kinds of exercise would help you most. In general, fitness routines for those with joint pain, like most fitness programs, include the following components.

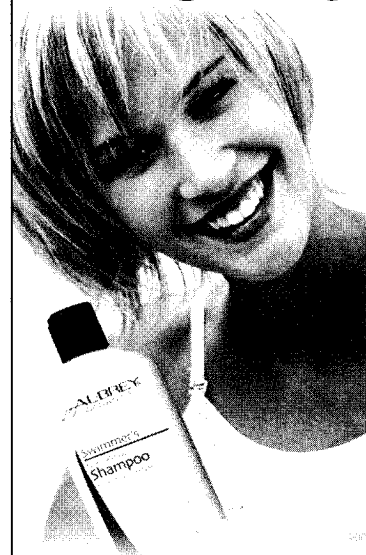
Flexibility. Daily stretching relaxes stiff spots and stabilizes muscles and joints. You can do basic stretches (see page 88) or try yoga or tai chi. Both disciplines allow you to adapt movements to fit your comfort level, build muscle, and improve balance and agility.

Weight training. Studies show that strengthening your muscles reduces your risk of OA because the muscles take some of the load off the joints. Work all the major muscle groups—arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, back, buttocks, hips, and legs for 20 minutes, two to three times a week, taking at least one day off between sessions. Any kind of resistance, from machines to your body weight, will do.

Cardio. Aerobic exercise helps stimulate blood flow, which is good for joints. Aim for 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic activity three to five days a week. Walking, swimming, elliptical training machines, and cycling are joint-friendly, low-impact choices. +

JULIA TOLLIVER MARANAN is a Boston-based freelancer specializing in health and fitness.

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