

# Eating for Osteoarthritis

## Foods that calm inflammation and ease pain

If you're feeling the aches and pains of osteoarthritis, whether it's occasional stiffness or chronic discomfort requiring medication, "diet can make an enormous impact," says George Munoz, MD, an internist and integrative rheumatologist at the Arthritis and Osteoporosis Treatment and Research Center in Miami. "I use [dietary strategies] in conjunction with appropriate supplements and medications, exercise, and mind-body approaches to reduce inflammation." That means possibly lowering—or, in mild cases, even eliminating—doses of your medication. Here are some ideas for specific foods to work into your daily diet as well as a few reminders about foods to avoid.

**Healthy fats** Research shows that omega-3s help reduce levels of compounds that cause inflammation and cartilage deterioration in arthritis. These healthy fats occur in cold-water fish such as sardines or wild Alaskan salmon, omega-3 fortified eggs, freshly ground flaxseeds, and walnuts. Extra-virgin olive oil, a staple of the Mediterranean diet, contains antioxidant polyphenols that calm inflammation. A few studies also indicate that an extract of avocado may help relieve arthritis symptoms; Dr. Munoz recommends for his patients to simply incorporate avocados and other sources of monounsaturated fats, including nuts and olives, into their diets.

**Antioxidants** These compounds protect against cell-damaging free radicals and reduce activity of the enzyme cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2), a major cause of joint inflammation. Research shows that antioxidant-rich ginger, turmeric, berries, cherries, and green and white teas show particular benefit for arthritis. A good general approach is to "eat the rainbow," selecting many different colors of fruits and vegetables daily for their vast array of antioxidants and micronutrients, says Dr. Munoz.

**Vitamin D** Osteoarthritis may progress faster and cause more pain and disability in people who don't consume enough vitamin D. A recent study suggests that the vitamin might be especially protective against arthritis development and progression in people with low bone-mineral density. Good food sources include fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, tuna, and sardines; fortified milk and cereal; and egg yolks.

**Foods to avoid** Dr. Munoz advises eliminating trans fats and cutting back on processed carbohydrates, sugars such as high-fructose corn syrup, and chemical food stabilizers like those used in ice cream and beer (such as alginate). Some people find that eating less meat helps to diminish symptoms, possibly because meat (especially poultry) is rich in arachidonic acid, a fatty acid that promotes inflammation. In rare cases, sensitivity to gluten or casein (a protein in cow's milk) may worsen pain and stiffness. If you suspect certain foods aggravate your symptoms, you can try an elimination diet by avoiding a particular food for a few weeks and keeping a journal of your reaction. However, "in people who have complex medical histories or who have multiple food allergies or intolerances, it's best to work with a holistic nutritionist or a certified nutritionist who is knowledgeable in this area," says Dr. Munoz.

**Other strategies** Experts recommend that arthritis sufferers maintain a healthy weight and lose weight if needed. Excess fat not only stresses your joints, it can actually increase inflammation. If joint stiffness makes food preparation itself too difficult, you might consult an occupational therapist, who can offer tips and suggest products that aid manual dexterity and hand function.

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