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How Diet And Herbs Alleviate Arthritis

by Ada Kulesza

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More than 20 percent of American adults suffer from arthritis. Joint inflammation is painful and sometimes debilitating. Most people looking for relief from doctors get medicines that temporarily stop the pain, but don't really address the cause — or stop the disease progression.

Arthritis is a condition that shows the flaws in the American medical system, and the standard American lifestyle. On the personal level, it starts with choices at grocery stores, kitchens and restaurants, and on the collective level, with toxic environments and harmful farming practices.

Chronic pain leads to stress, weakness, and depression. Does one-fifth of America have to suffer with pain, immobility, and the frustration that comes with arthritis? Are one in five people doomed to take painkillers every day, or get steroid injections to manage the condition?

Reset.Me interviewed five natural health experts about treating the most common types of arthritis, rheumatoid (or gout) and osteoarthritis. We've compiled natural and gentle treatment options that alleviate pain and swelling without the side effects of chemical meds.

More importantly, the experts share herbs, supplements, and lifestyle changes that can halt, and possibly reverse, the disease progression.



A Behind-The-Scenes Disease

Rheumatoid and osteoarthritis share joint inflammation and pain in common. Osteoarthritis often affects older people, where the cartilage between bones deteriorates and eventually bone meets bone, limiting movement and creating pain. Rheumatoid arthritis, on the other hand, can be caused by an injury, or as a result of an autoimmune condition.

Scientific literature shows that both types of arthritis are linked with lifestyle. Diet is a big factor when it comes to arthritis onset and progression. Once someone has arthritis, a healthy diet becomes the most important and effective way to alleviate pain and slow down the disease.



“The first thing I look at is diet,” says Dr. Matthew Brennecke, a naturopath based in Colorado. “I always give patients a diet diary to keep track of everything they eat for a year. It’s very important to get a real idea of what patients actually put into their mouths every day.”

Food allergies often cause inflammation because the immune system flares up to fight what it mistakes as a harmful substance. Brennecke tests for allergies with food allergy panels to get “a lab result of what foods we should take out of the diet and what we should add. Most people have problems with dairy, wheat, and eggs.” Meat is also known to create inflammation.

“Then we increase anti-inflammatory foods, such as heavy vegetables, and dark leafy greens,” he says. “By eating an anti-inflammatory diet, we see pretty good improvements.”

The Standard American Diet (SAD) compromises health in a number of ways. Often, it lacks the vitamins and minerals needed to keep bodies in balance. Too much meat, starch and processed food also result in weight gain, which makes arthritis worse.

Much food is produced with chemicals that create health problems. Nearly all corn, soy and cotton fields in the United States are sprayed with herbicides, namely Roundup, which contains glyphosate, a chemical shown to have a serious impact on health. Its use has outpaced research, but the World Health Organization says it’s likely carcinogenic.

Common cosmetics such as shampoo, lotions, and soap often contain chemicals such as parabens and phthalates, preservatives that may interfere with the body’s hormones. Although these chemicals are commonly found in products millions of people use everyday, their long-term effects haven’t been extensively studied.

	Osteoarthritis	Rheumatoid Arthritis
Cause (Western)	Degeneration, bone demineralization	Autoimmune disease, infection, injury
Qualities (Chinese)	Cold, wind, damp obstruction, qi deficiency	Hot, wind, damp obstruction
Lifestyle	Exercise, healthy weight	Exercise, healthy weight
Foods to Avoid	Inflammatory food: Omega-6, starches, processed food, meat, dairy, eggs	Inflammatory food: Omega-6, starches, processed food, meat, dairy, eggs
Foods to Include	Omega-3 (chia seeds, fish, flaxseed), dark leafy greens, antioxidants (berries, apples, green tea, brightly colored produce), bitter (bitter melon, dandelion), pungent (onions, garlic), spicy (cayenne, cinnamon)	Omega-3 (chia seeds, fish, flaxseed), dark leafy greens, antioxidants (berries, apples, green tea, brightly colored produce), bitter (bitter melon, dandelion), pungent (onions, garlic), oats, cooling (cucumber, buttermilk)
Herbs	Turmeric, cinnamon, evening primrose, green-lipped mussel extract, oats, cayenne pepper, capsaicin salve, fresh nettles on the skin	Turmeric, Siberian ginseng, elderberry, licorice, echinacea, rosemary, Chinese astragalus, devil's claw salve
Supplements	Meriva, vitamins C and D, niacin (with caution), potassium and magnesium, celadrin	Meriva, vitamins C and D, niacin (with caution), potassium and magnesium, celadrin

How Modern Medicine Treats Arthritis

As we age, our bodies get stiffer. Circulation slows. We get weaker, and cartilage degenerates. Skin loses elasticity, muscles deteriorate, and hair turns gray. It's a natural process.

“Arthritis has basically three stages,” says Brennecke. “Stage one is breakdown of cartilage. Stage two is abnormal cartilage repair. But at stage three, the breakdown products in stage two induce inflammation, and then you get joint degeneration.”

Symptoms arise when arthritis has progressed far enough to make reversal difficult. Often patients visit a medical doctor and get a prescription or injection for the pain and inflammation.

“Modern medicine uses anti-inflammatories and steroids, drugs that slow down the immune system, so people are more likely to develop infections,” says David Foreman, a pharmacist and author. “With decreased immunity, you're more likely to get colds, flu and infections.”

“With non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs we have the potential for gastrointestinal upset, negative effects of liver and kidneys, and sodium retention,” he says. “Steroids have the same effects, but will often contribute to problems with the adrenal system, so you're more likely to burn your body's energy out. Fatigue, altered mood, and depression result. They also negatively affect the blood sugar, so weight gain is a big thing. Bones become thin and brittle.”

“Steroids are significantly more evil to the body than non-steroid anti-inflammatories,” he says. “You just can’t keep taking cortisone for the rest of your life.”

Foreman says that undernourished people develop arthritis when the body takes minerals out of bones and those minerals deposit in joints, creating a situation akin to fine sandpaper rubbing slowly over time.



“Too much refined food, such as pasta and bread, alter the pH of your body, and so the body will take minerals out of bones to adjust the body’s pH. Too much or too little protein will make this happen,” he says.

Green vegetables are essential to preventing, and slowing, arthritis, by nourishing the body with minerals and stabilizing the body’s pH.

“Eat a rainbow every day — a food from every color of the rainbow. Colorful food is rich in antioxidants, and antioxidants go a long way in preventing all diseases,” Foreman says. “Make your food your medicine. And add more omega-3, such as chia seeds. Omega-6 can cause more inflammation.”

Immunity And Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis has the stiffness, pain and inflammation of osteoarthritis, but is caused by injury or an autoimmune condition.

“When people come in, I address the immune system and stabilize it, until we can boost it,” says Dr. Jennifer Burns, a naturopath based in Arizona. “So first, I use herbs that are a little weaker. After we build up immunity, we use stronger ones. I use Myers’ Cocktail intravenous nutrients.”

The gentle herbs Burns recommends for the immune system include Siberian ginseng and elderberry. She also uses licorice in combination with other herbs, as an immune booster and anti-inflammatory. Echinacea also helps the immune system.

“Echinacea has cannabinoids for pain,” she says, “but it’s also anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and antiviral. And licorice supports the adrenals.”

She also recommends adaptogens, herbs which stabilize the whole system, such as oats, rosemary, and Chinese astragalus.

For rheumatoid arthritis, devil’s claw in a cream or salve works well to alleviate inflammation and pain topically. For osteoarthritis, salves containing capsaicin, the active ingredient in cayenne peppers, also bring fast relief.

Toxicity And Arthritis

Dr. Susan Kolb is a plastic surgeon and author of the book *The Naked Truth About Breast Implants: From Harm to Healing*. Most of her patients develop arthritis as a result of toxicity from ruptured or leaking breast implants, but she says that for most people, allergies and toxicity contribute to arthritis.

She uses kinesiology, a somewhat controversial method of diagnosis, to test for allergies and reactions to such things as wheat, intracellular infections, and toxicity. Then she treats symptoms with supplements like curcumin, green-lipped mussel extract, and evening primrose oil.

Most importantly, patients need to remove the cause of the arthritis, whether that's a food sensitivity or infection. She also uses artificial joint injections to rebuild cartilage.

Traditional Chinese Medicine

“Chinese medicine views the body, our vitality and our health, as measured in qi. It's not a thing — you can't see it. It's a representational term for vitality in the body,” says Tony Burris, an acupuncturist and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioner. “As we age, qi diminishes.”



Traditional Chinese medicine is a philosophical system that views the human body as part of its environment, and sees the systems and organs as intrinsically interlinked. As the body ages and qi diminishes, outer forces can invade more easily. “Cold, wind, damp and heat cause arthritis when they get into your joints,” Burris says. “They block the flow of nutrients.”

A TCM practitioner would look at weak teeth, hair and bones as a deficiency of the kidneys, and degenerated cartilage a symptom of a poorly functioning liver. “The liver lubricates, nourishes and keeps muscles supple,” Burris says. “As we age they become more brittle and dry. Cartilage has less blood supply than muscle so it's harder to keep plump and moist.”

Chinese medicine assigns different flavors different qualities, so people can easily discern what kinds of foods and herbs can offset certain conditions. Being a result of growing older, osteoarthritis is characterized by cold, so warmer, spicier foods and herbs help.

“Turmeric and cinnamon, which are warm and penetrating, are good for gnarled, closed-up fingers, and will help straighten them out,” Burris says.

Rheumatoid arthritis has a hot quality, so cooling foods and herbs would be more helpful.

“Food can have hot or cold qualities, but they also have flavor. Bitter is good for rheumatoid arthritis because it has a draining quality for edema. In the West we don't eat a lot of bitter food, except perhaps

coffee, which bears this out because it's a diuretic and certainly does have a draining quality," Burris says. Other bitter herbs and food include dandelion and bitter gourd.

Other helpful foods are acrid and pungent, such as garlic, onions, and ginger.

The Truth About Arthritis And Aging

Aging is inevitable and bodies deteriorate. Sadly, the American lifestyle quickens the process — stress, sedentary work, processed food heavy on meat, toxic environments, and a reliance on chemical pharmaceuticals to treat symptoms but mostly ignore the cause of illness.

In a catch-22, people who suffer from arthritis may find it difficult to exercise and stay active, but it's essential for managing and slowing the disease. Overweight people are also more likely to have arthritis, so exercise is doubly important.

Arthritis also has links to depression, since losing range of motion can be disheartening and frustrating. Managing arthritic pain and removing the cause of inflammation can be key to maintaining happiness and ease in daily life. As Dr. Jennifer Burns says, "You're okay. You're still a whole person, even if you need help with simple things, even if you can't open a jar."

When it comes to emergencies, allopathic medicine is amazing. But when it comes to chronic diseases like arthritis, it's woefully inadequate. "The word doctor means teacher," says Brennecke. "When you go the conventional medicine route, you have seven minutes with a practitioner who writes you a prescription. As a naturopath, I spend over an hour trying to get at the root of the condition."

Doctors are human beings, and the medical system is a business. People who suffer from arthritis can take their health back by changing the one habit that many people do without thinking — eating. As Brennecke points out, "If you take anything from me, it's that 90 percent of all chronic illness is due to what you put in your mouth."

For more information about acupuncture, herbs and Traditional Chinese Medicine, contact Tony Burris L.Ac. at Eagle Acupuncture in Boise, Idaho at (208) 938-1277 or mailbox@eagleacupuncture.com. Visit his website at EagleAcupuncture.com.

