



Diet and Arthritis

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Introduction

Arthritis is a name given to inflammation of bone joints. There are over 100 forms of arthritis but the main two forms are Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and Osteo-Arthritis (OA). This fact sheet is about the dietary management of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA).



What is RA?

RA is a condition that can affect many parts of the body, including the joints. In rheumatoid arthritis, the joint lining swells, invading surrounding tissues, and producing chemical substances that attack and destroy the joint surface, causing inflammation and pain. This commonly occurs in joints of the hands and feet but other joints may become swollen as well. Many joints of the body may be involved at the same time.

Dietary management of RA



1. Maintain a healthy weight

Try to lose weight if you are overweight (for some great practical information on how to lose weight see www.bdaweightwise.com). Too much body fat increases the levels of inflammation in the body, making your joints more painful. A healthier body weight reduces this inflammation and pain.

2. Change your fats

The types of fats and oils you choose can influence levels of inflammation and pain.

Saturated fats (found in full-fat dairy products and processed foods) can increase pain and inflammation in the body. So can too many oils and margarines made from corn or sunflower sources. These are rich in omega-6 polyunsaturates, which can also increase general inflammation.

Monounsaturates are 'neutral' fats and do not encourage or worsen inflammation. Choose olive oil, olive-oil-based margarines, and 'blended' vegetable oils rich in mono-unsaturated fats. As body cells naturally renew, monounsaturates will replace the omega-6 polyunsaturates within the cell to reduce inflammation. Be patient - it will take several weeks for any noticeable effect.

If you need to lose weight, don't fry foods, avoid pastries, and choose a 'low-fat', olive-oil-based margarine.

3. Follow a 'Mediterranean' type of diet

Research shows that a diet containing modest lean meat portions, mono-unsaturated fats and plenty of vegetables can reduce inflammation by helping the body 'mop up' body chemicals which cause inflammation.

Aim for at least four portions of vegetables a day - fresh, frozen or canned, plus at least two servings of fruit. A portion is equal to a 'handful' or a few tablespoons. Choose vegetables of different colours for a wide range of plant nutrients to help reduce inflammation.

4. Eat more oily fish

Fish with darker flesh such as sardines, mackerel, herring, tuna, salmon, swordfish, marlin, and snapper are rich in fish oils (omega-3 polyunsaturates). Fish oils can reduce general inflammation, reducing both pain and your long-term risk of heart disease.



Two to three portions a week give maximum health benefit.

Omega-3-enriched eggs can be useful if you do not like oily fish.



(Note: girls and women who might have a baby one day, or who are pregnant or breastfeeding, shouldn't eat more than two portions of oily fish a week. Women not considering pregnancy, boys and men can eat up to four portions a week.)

5. Eat iron-rich foods



Tiredness is common with RA which can be caused by anaemia. Eat iron-rich foods regularly to prevent this. Red and dark meats, oily fish, pulses, eggs and green leafy vegetables contain iron. Limit liver intake to one portion a week. Fortified foods such as breakfast cereals are also useful sources.



6. Restrictive diets and food allergies

Fasting is an extreme way of controlling pain and inflammation in RA, and is not recommended. A vegetarian diet may help relieve symptoms for some, but care is needed to ensure a nutritionally-sound diet. RA is the result of a change in how the immune system works, so common alternative practices often suggest food allergy as a cause. Diagnostic tests such as Applied Kinesiology (AK), Vega testing and cytotoxic testing do not diagnose food allergy accurately. ELISA testing gives more reliable results, but simply restricting

foods can cause nutritional deficiencies. If you want to change your diet in some way, a dietitian referral via your GP can help you make sensible dietary choices.

7. Nutritional supplements

High dose Vitamin C (1000mg) can worsen symptoms of RA. Anti-oxidant nutrients are necessary for good health but have no proven effect on RA symptoms. A general multivitamin and multimineral supplement can provide useful background fortification.

Fish oil supplements can reduce background inflammation - select a supplement containing a total of 500-750mg of the fish oils EPA and DHA. Plant omega-3 fat (GLA) from linseed, evening primrose, and borage (starflower) oils have a weaker effect on reducing inflammation, and do not seem to be of great benefit.

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