

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Drug-Free Management of Arthritis

Arthritis is a common disorder, particularly among older adults. The pain of arthritis can range from uncomfortable to debilitating. Many who suffer from arthritis use painkillers regularly to manage their condition, but research shows these drugs may be unsafe for long-term use.

Fortunately, there are many ways to ease the pain of arthritis without medication. Dr. Gravesen gives the facts about pain medications and offers a range of natural tools to help patients with arthritis live life fully.



A Look at Arthritis

The term *arthritis* encompasses a range of conditions that affect the joints. The most common is osteoarthritis, also known as degenerative joint disease.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is particularly prevalent in older adults as the result of years of wear and tear on the joints. The cartilage that separates bones in each joint becomes dry and degrades, eventually leaving the bones rubbing against each other. Surrounding tissue becomes inflamed, resulting in pain and stiffness.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a systematic autoimmune disease which causes degradation of cartilage and joint inflammation similar to that of os-

teoarthritis, but usually marked by more intense pain. Other forms of arthritis and related disorders include psoriatic arthritis, septic arthritis and gout.

Beside their effects on joints, the other common factor shared by various types of arthritis is that they cannot be cured. However, Dr. Gravesen recommends several steps to manage the symptoms and prevent the condition from worsening.

The Risks of Pain Medication

Arthritis sufferers often rely on pain medications. While drugs may provide temporary relief, they should be used with great caution, because they can have dangerous side effects, particularly with long-term use.

Acetaminophen (also known as paracetamol), a common over-the-counter analgesic, is often thought of as one of the safest drugs for pain. However, research links its use to increased risk of hypertension, asthma and intestinal problems.

Acetaminophen overdose is the leading cause of acute liver failure — regular alcohol consumption increases the risk (*Med J Aust* 2008;188:296-301).

Another common type of pain medica-

tion is nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), including aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen.

Many NSAIDs irritate the gastrointestinal tract, causing complications ranging from nausea and stomach upset to peptic ulcers (*Clin Rheumatol* 2006;25:S2-8). Studies also associate NSAID use with heightened risk of heart attack (*Arthritis Res Ther* 2007;9:R4).

Opioids are a stronger class of painkillers that may be prescribed for severe pain such as that of rheumatoid arthritis. They commonly cause constipation, nausea and drowsiness and are highly addictive (*Pain* 2004;112:372-80, *Curr Pain Headache Rep* 2005;9:390-98).

Chiropractic for Arthritis Sufferers

Rather than depending on drugs, chiropractic champions the body's natural ability to heal itself. Chiropractic care may reduce discomfort and slow the progress of arthritis.

When assessing a chiropractic patient, Dr. Gravesen looks for dysfunctional areas in the spine called *vertebral subluxations*.



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These misalignments of the spinal bones (vertebrae) are quite common and trigger a range of symptoms, including musculoskeletal pain. Using gentle maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**, the doctor corrects vertebral subluxations, relieving pain and often improving range of motion in affected areas.

Clinical trials back the therapeutic power of chiropractic care for arthritis patients. One study randomly assigned 250 osteoarthritis patients to receive moist heat therapy either alone or in addition to 20 sessions of chiropractic care over several weeks. The chiropractic group experienced faster and more pronounced pain reduction as well as improvement in range of motion and ease in daily living (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2006;29:107-14).

The doctor advises patients regarding other lifestyle changes to support optimal health, including nutrition, exercise and ergonomics. These components of well-being can have an impact on arthritis symptoms, whether by directly lessening discomfort or strengthening overall health and subsequent ability to cope with arthritis.

The Importance of Exercise

Regular exercise is key for managing arthritis. It improves and maintains strength and flexibility, helping the body support deteriorating joints more comfortably. Aerobic exercise, resistance training and stretching should all be part of an arthritis exercise regimen. Maintenance of a healthy weight through exercise also reduces stress on arthritic joints, lessening pain and improving mobility (*Arthritis Rheum* 2004;50:1501-10).

Researchers in one study divided a group of 365 adults into three groups. The study participants were all aged 60 years or older and suffered from osteoarthritis. The groups spent 18 months in an aerobic-exercise program, a resistance-exercise program or a health-education program. Both exercise groups displayed significant improvements in a battery of assessments of pain and mobility, compared with the health education group (*JAMA* 1997;277:25-31).

Water aerobics classes, in which the buoyancy of water supports and protects the joints, are also effective in reducing pain and improving function in individuals with arthritis (*Health Technol Assess* 2005;9:1-114).

Additionally, a recent small-scale study indicates that Iyengar yoga improves pain, disability and mental health in arthritis sufferers (*J Pain Symptom Manage* 2010;39:904-13).

Nutrition and Supplements

An overall nutritious diet is especially critical when living with a chronic condition like arthritis. Just like exercise, healthy eating controls obesity and the complications it can bring to arthritis. Plus, studies show that low intake of several vitamins can hasten the progression of osteoarthritis (*Curr Rheumatol Rep* 1999;1:48-53).

For rheumatoid arthritis in particular, omega-3 fatty acids — found in fatty fish — have an anti-inflammatory effect that appears to relieve symptoms (*JPEN J Parenter Enteral Nutr* 2010;34:151-5).

A review of studies uncovers several nutritional and herbal supplements

that are effective in easing the discomfort of arthritis. These include glucosamine sulfate, avocado/soybean unsaponifiables, diacerein, green tea, ginger, turmeric, and supplemental vitamins C and D (*Aust Fam Physician* 2010;39:638).

Be sure to talk to the doctor about proper dosage and possible interactions before beginning any new supplement.

Heat and Cold

Some of the simplest home treatments for arthritis pain are hot and cold therapy. Experiment with heating pads (only for short periods of time); warm showers or baths; hot and cold compresses; and ice packs to see what works well for you. Ask the doctor what specific approach will work best for your particular condition.

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