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Aches, Pains And Diet

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Stiffness, arthritis, and aching joints: what have these to do with diet? The causes of various forms of arthritis are complex and sometimes little understood. Yet recent research indicates that foods can significantly affect arthritic symptoms for certain people. For example:

* Some individuals with rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, or fibromyalgia find that avoiding certain foods reduces symptoms.

* Ensuring adequate amounts of essential nutrients (omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, and vitamin B12) improves overall health and may alleviate symptoms.

* Weight management can reduce the burden on the joints of those with osteoarthritis and gouty arthritis.

When researching our recent “Food Allergy Survival Guide” (Melina, Stepaniak and Davis, Healthy Living Publications), I was intrigued to find that for a number of conditions (arthritis, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, and headaches), the potential roles played by food sensitivities and diet are often neglected, for several reasons. With arthritis for example, first the forms and causes vary from one person to another and can involve multiple origins. Second, food intolerance reactions often occur hours later, by which time numerous foods and beverages have been consumed, making trigger foods difficult to track. Third, the degree of reaction is affected by other lifestyle factors: medications, intestinal infections, general health, exercise, and the amount of an offending food that is consumed. Fourth, entirely different foods trigger reactions for one person or another. In a group with similar arthritic symptoms, some are adversely affected by dairy products; for others the

culprits are meat, wheat, citrus fruits, or plants in the nightshade group. Some find their condition to improve with increased intakes of omega-3 fatty acids. Others are unaffected by dietary modifications. Thus no single change helps everyone with arthritis.

An early report on diet and arthritis appeared in the British Medical Journal in 1981 after a woman's symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis disappeared when she entirely avoided corn. In recent decades, Scandinavians have taken the lead in exploring this field. For example:

* In Norway, 53 people with rheumatoid arthritis were divided into two groups. Over four months, half of the group followed a nutritious diet that was free of animal products (meat, fish, poultry, eggs, dairy, products), gluten (wheat protein), citrus fruit, sugar, caffeine, and alcohol. The others remained on their regular diet and could include all of these items. About half of those on the experimental diet showed significant improvements and reduction of symptoms, compared with improvements in only two of the people on their regular diet. Next, those whose symptoms had improved with dietary change gradually challenged themselves to determine their individual trigger foods.

* Swedish scientists found a diet that was vegan (no animal products) and gluten-free improved the signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis for 40 percent of participants.

* A vegan diet containing plenty of raw foods has proven to reduce symptoms of fibromyalgia for some.

* Joint pain is linked with consumption of meat, dairy products, chocolate, and nightshade vegetables for certain individuals.

* Avoiding obesity and excess alcohol can reduce risk of gouty arthritis. In the past, those with gout were advised to avoid legumes, yet recent studies show that these nutritious foods can be included.

* Optimal intakes of omega-3 fatty acids (found in flaxseed oil or walnuts) may have beneficial effects in inflammatory disorders such as arthritis. Borage oil or evening primrose oil (not to be used during pregnancy) also may have anti-inflammatory effects.

* Ginger has a long tradition of use in China, India, and Tibet in treatment of osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis; recent research lends support. Furthermore, freshly grated ginger certainly can pep up a stir-fry!

* Finnish researchers are investigating use of probiotics (beneficial intestinal bacteria) to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life for some with juvenile chronic arthritis or mild rheumatoid arthritis.

Tracking down one's own possible food culprits is time consuming and involves awareness and detective work. Diet revision should be viewed as an experiment, not a guaranteed cure and further research will be welcomed. Yet for some, the improvement in quality of life is superb.

Vesanto Melina, MS, Registered Dietitian, is co-author of seven food and nutrition classics. "The Food Allergy Survival Guide" includes valuable information on diet and various conditions, guidelines for discovering your own food sensitivities, meeting nutrient requirements at all ages despite food sensitivities, plus outstanding recipes that are free of all of the top allergens. Web: www.camd58.sg-host.com and www.foodallergysurvivalguide.com ; Email: vesanto@camd58.sg-host.com ; Phone: 604-882-6782.

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