

conquer arthritis.

Naturopath **Louise O'Connor** has the latest research and the best natural cures to prevent and treat arthritis pain.

Do you notice pain and swelling in your joints, or stiffness on rising in the morning? Maybe your knees complain when you go up stairs? These symptoms can signal arthritis. The two most significant forms of this degenerative joint disease are osteoarthritis (OA) and rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

RA is an autoimmune condition in which the body's immune system attacks the joint, causing damage and inflammation. OA tends to affect older people and targets weight-bearing joints. The onset is subtle, with morning stiffness the commonest first sign. OA also occurs in the hands, particularly at the base of the thumb and fingers. RA is characterised by systemic inflammation, whereas OA is localised in specific joints. Symptoms common to both include pain, swelling, joint deformity and a decreased range of motion. Over time, the effects can be increasingly debilitating. However, it is possible to avoid or treat symptoms of both types of arthritis, without drugs.

Ginger contains compounds that inhibit the production of COX-2 enzymes, which trigger inflammation in the body.



Eat joint-friendly foods

1 The typical Western diet is high in acid-forming foods that fuel inflammation. For the body to function effectively, the blood needs a pH (acid: alkaline balance) that is slightly alkaline. Arthritis sufferers often have a low urine pH, indicating over-acidity. Generally, urine pH reflects the acid: alkaline balance of the blood, so ask your health practitioner about this test.

Stress and poor diet choices may have pushed you into the acid zone.

The worst dietary offenders are meat, sugar, fast foods, alcohol, soft drinks, and coffee. Restore optimal pH with joint-friendly vegetable juices and lots of parsley, broccoli, celery, garlic and ginger. Replace coffee with green tea and pure water. Avoid nightshade vegetables, such as potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant and capsicum, if these aggravate your symptoms. For some genetically susceptible individuals, the alkaloids in these vegies worsen arthritic pain.

CHECK YOUR D LEVELS

Vitamin D - which comes mainly from exposure to sunlight and dietary sources like oily fish and dairy products - is necessary for bone mineralisation, growth and repair. Researchers from Boston University have found that vitamin D improves muscle strength, physical mobility and pain reduction in people with osteoarthritis. The study also showed that vitamin D status correlated with the progression of the disease: those patients whose vitamin D levels decreased over time experienced more disability and pain. Ask your doctor for a blood test to check your D levels - if you are deficient, take a supplement and be certain to get outdoors for at least 20 minutes daily.

Meat, poultry, dairy products, eggs and polyunsaturated vegetable oils all contain fats that spark inflammation. Keep your joints supple by eating cold water fish, tofu, avocados, extra virgin olive oil, coconut oil and activated* nuts and seeds. Avoid canola, soy, corn and safflower oils and any processed foods that list 'vegetable oils' as an ingredient. Antioxidants mop up harmful free radicals which damage joint tissue. These natural compounds are found in colourful fruits, vegetables, and leafy salad greens.

THE OSTEOPOROSIS CONNECTION

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is associated with an increased risk for developing osteoporosis, or brittle bones. The powerful corticosteroid drugs often prescribed for RA can trigger bone loss, plus pain and loss of joint function caused by RA can result in less physical activity, increasing osteoporosis risk. Studies also show that bone loss can occur as a direct result of RA, and may be most pronounced in areas surrounding the affected joints. Of concern is the fact that women, who are more likely to have RA than men, are already at elevated risk of lower bone mineral density.



Beat the heat

2 Inflammation is the immune system's first reaction to injury, irritation or infection; it is an important part of the body's defence system and helps to speed healing.





EAT FOR RELIEF

A study in the *Annals of Rheumatic Disorders* shows that rheumatoid arthritis patients who ate a Mediterranean diet for 12 weeks – including lean protein like fish, shellfish, and limited dairy, plus plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and olive oil – reported a 15 percent reduction in pain symptoms, improved physical function and greater vitality. Another study, published in *Lipids*, suggests that it is the olive oil which is of most benefit, as it dampens the body's inflammatory response.

However, when this protective mechanism is stuck in the “on” position, there is unrestrained inflammation which, over time, results in pain, swelling, and joint deterioration.

Reducing joint inflammation is most important in treating arthritis. Conventional non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like aspirin and ibuprofen are often used to reduce symptoms. However, long term use can lead to digestive irritation, even gastric ulcers. The newer NSAIDs, the COX-2 inhibitors, have fewer gastrointestinal side effects but they may also pose other risks, including stroke and heart attack.

Scientists are increasingly interested in the benefits of omega-3 fats in reducing the inflammatory process associated with arthritis. These essential fatty acids are found predominantly in fish oils. Omega-3 fats exert a potent natural anti-inflammatory effect. Look for good quality fish oil with a high ratio of both eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). Vegetarians can source these good fats from flaxseed oil. If you opt for flax seeds, they must be crushed to ensure nutrient availability.



Take soothing supplements

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Cartilage acts as a cushion to allow the joint to glide freely. Without cartilage, the joints develop a very rough and rigid surface to move on. While some risk factors - such as ageing, repetitive stress or genetics - are not totally controllable, it's never too late to start taking care of your joints to slow down destructive changes.

Glucosamine is a natural joint nutrient derived most commonly from the chitin found in the shells of shellfish. Glucosamine sulphate has been used by millions of people worldwide as a treatment for arthritis. The main function of glucosamine in joints is to stimulate the manufacture of glycosaminoglycans, the structural components of cartilage that promote joint mobility and flexibility.

Glucosamine sulphate addresses the cause of arthritis by promoting cartilage production, which eases pain and assists the repair of damaged joints. It works well with chondroitin sulphate. If you are already taking NSAIDs, a combination of the two may provide added anti-inflammatory effects.

Methylsulphonylmethane (MSM) is a natural source of sulphur, one of the major building blocks of glycosaminoglycans. MSM plays an important role in the maintenance of joint cartilage and enhances the benefits of glucosamine sulphate and chondroitin sulphate to alleviate arthritic pain.



Pick a pain-relieving herb

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Botanical remedies can provide relief from chronic inflammation

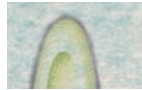
and pain. For example, turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) has long been used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine to treat arthritis. Extensive research shows that its active constituent, curcumin, protects against free radical damage and plays a powerful role in down-regulating inflammation. Concentrated curcumin is available as a supplement.

Willow bark (*Salix alba*) has anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties. In the late 19th century, salicylic acid was isolated from this herb and went on to become the model for developing aspirin.

A double-blind clinical trial of OA patients, published in *Phytotherapy Research*, confirms the analgesic effects of this prominent herb.

Boswellia (*Boswellia serrata*) is another traditional Ayurvedic remedy for arthritis. One of the most recent studies, published in *Biochemical Pharmacology*, suggests that its effects are due to its rich content of bioactive compounds that inhibit pro-inflammatory messengers, much like conventional NSAIDs do.

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) has been valued for centuries for its healing properties. This herb also inhibits the biochemical pathways activated during times of chronic inflammation. A study in *Arthritis & Rheumatism* shows ginger has significant effects on easing inflammation to reduce the symptoms of OA. A trained herbalist will be skilled in prescribing an individual herbal formula. Find a registered herbalist at www.nhaa.org.au.



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Get moving

There is no doubt that physical activity creates significantly stronger and more flexible joints.

Walking is commonly recommended to help reduce pain and increase joint function for people with arthritis. Researchers from the University of Queensland have shown that sufferers can achieve significant improvements in their symptoms when walking is combined with glucosamine sulphate. Low-impact exercise, such as swimming, cycling, tai chi or strength training, also keeps your joints in good shape.

Being overweight is associated with an increased risk of OA. Carrying extra weight places an additional load on your hips, knees, ankles, and feet. Remember to always exercise within your

limits. If arthritis pain is preventing regular activity, reduce your daily calorie intake. This will stop any excess energy from food being stored as body fat.

Thinking of trying a yoga class? New research from Ohio State University reveals regular yoga practice lessens the production of cytokines, inflammatory compounds triggered in response to stress and ageing. Flo Fenton, senior yoga instructor and *Nature & Health* contributor, adds: "Yoga helps you to achieve a calmer, more relaxed state of mind. The healing that underpins all yoga techniques allows us to live a more balanced and harmonious life."

* 'Activated' nuts and seeds have been soaked in water and sea salt (seeds for up to 12 hours, nuts for up to 48 hours), which makes them easier to digest and also makes the nutrients more bioavailable. This process gives a signal to the nuts' and seeds' natural 'inhibitors', which keep them from spoiling by remaining dormant, to germinate and so begin the life process. References available on request.



LOUISE O'CONNOR is a leading naturopath who writes and educates on women's natural health. Visit her at www.healthy-hormone-balance.com.

THE GOOD OILS

These do-it-yourself oil blends help to relieve sore joints.

- Blend 15ml of a neutral-scented oil, such as almond, with 3-5 drops of juniper, cajeput, or wintergreen essential oil. Gently rub the mixture into sore joints. Store in a dark-coloured glass bottle.
- On a budget? You won't have to buy any special ingredients for this easy and effective recipe. Infuse a teaspoonful of dried chilli flakes in 2 tablespoons of sunflower oil overnight, then strain through a coffee filter. Test on a small area first, and keep away from eyes.
- An old-fashioned castor oil pack is as easy to make as it is effective. Spread castor oil over the afflicted joint. Put cottonwool or a piece of flannel over that, and then apply a heating pad or hot water bottle.

WHAT ABOUT GOUT?

Gout is an intensely painful form of arthritis. The affected joint becomes painful, red and swollen for days or weeks. It commonly occurs in the joint of the big toe, but can also affect ankles, elbows, wrists, and hands. Acute attacks arise when too much uric acid builds up in the blood and settles as urate crystals in the joint. Normally, uric acid dissolves in the blood and is eliminated via the urine. But too much activity by an enzyme called xanthine oxidase enzyme concentrates uric acid. Try these tips to reduce and prevent attacks:

- Acute attacks are precipitated by consuming large amounts of gout-promoting foods, e.g. shellfish, anchovies, sardines, organ meats, caviar, and brewers yeast. Cut down on diuretics like alcohol, black tea and coffee, which also trigger an attack. Eat more fruit and vegetables, and hydrate with purified water to flush your kidneys.
- The nutrients quercetin and folic acid are powerful inhibitors of xanthine oxidase. Combine these supplements with fish oil to cut down inflammation, and antioxidants to reduce free radical damage. However, a high intake of vitamin C should be avoided.

Stress, a bacterial or viral infection in the joint, and an acidic diet all cause tissue breakdown that worsens arthritis.