Introduction

There is a lot of confusing advice on diet in magazines and books, and many food supplements which are claimed to help with arthritis. Some people end up taking expensive food supplements or eat elaborate diets which do not help, or may even be harmful. Often the same results can be achieved by simpler, cheaper methods. For example, it is better to get the vitamins you need from food, rather than take supplements.

This booklet explains how the food you eat might affect your arthritis. It then advises you on the most sensible diet to follow and answers the most common questions which people ask about food and arthritis.

Can changing my diet really help my arthritis?

Yes. The right diet can certainly help some people with arthritis and rheumatism. For example, if you are overweight and suffer from arthritis, one of the most important things you can do to help yourself is to change the amount and type of food you eat. Recent research has also discovered several new links between arthritis and diet.

What are the links between the food I eat and my arthritis?

There are three important links between the food you eat and your arthritis, as described below.

Does your food include all the basics?

For example, is your regular diet giving you all the important basic nutrients including minerals such as calcium and iron? If it does not, then your general health will suffer and this will also make your arthritis worse.

Are you eating foods which might make your arthritis worse?

There are two ways in which food can make your arthritis worse:

- some foods produce chemicals in the body which aggravate arthritis in some people
- some people are allergic to certain foods. This is highly individual, and varies from person to person.

Are you eating foods or food supplements which might help your arthritis or general health?

For example, recent research has shown that certain oils can help arthritis (see later).

How you can change your diet to help your arthritis: three golden rules

There are three golden rules to help your arthritis:

- eat a balanced diet which gives you all the vitamins and minerals you need and which also keeps your weight down
- eat more fruit and vegetables
- take regular exercise.

We shall say more about these after we’ve explained why watching your weight is so important.

Why is my weight so important?

The most important single link between your diet and arthritis is certainly your weight. Being overweight puts an extra burden on the weight-bearing joints (back, hips, knees, ankles and feet) when they are already damaged
or under strain. Because of the way joints work, the effect of the weight can be four or five times greater in important parts of the joint. This means that even a small weight loss can make a big difference to your joints. If you are overweight and have arthritis in any of your weight-bearing joints, losing weight will help you more than any expensive food supplements.

What is the best way to lose weight?

Slimming has become big business. There are many slimming treatments and so-called miracle diets, and this can be confusing. Unfortunately there is no miracle cure. Crash and fad diets are usually unbalanced and are not recommended. Most people find they put weight back on when they return to normal eating. The only way to lose weight permanently is to change what you eat.

To work normally, your body needs food to supply energy and a variety of vitamins and minerals. If your diet contains more energy than you burn up, your body will convert the extra energy to fat and you will put on weight. On the other hand, if your food contains less energy than you are using, you will lose weight. It may be that you are unable to take as much exercise as before because of your arthritis. This means that you need less energy and should eat less.

The energy in food is measured in kilocalories (kcal), sometimes just called calories. If you eat fewer calories, it is important not to eat less vitamins and minerals at the same time. This is why it is important to eat foods that have a lot of vitamins and minerals per calorie, such as fruit and vegetables.

It is healthy to eat starchy foods like bread, potatoes, rice, and pasta. They have no more calories than protein.

Cut down on fatty and sugary foods, and alcohol, and instead eat more starchy foods, fresh fruit and vegetables

Wholemeal versions of these starchy foods are better for you as they supply more vitamins, minerals and fibre. For example, wholemeal bread, brown rice, wholegrain breakfast cereals etc.

Cut down on the fat you eat

Fat has twice as many calories as the same weight of starch or protein. Most people eat far more fat than they need for health. Eating 1 oz (28 grams) less fat each day saves 252 calories! So cutting calories doesn’t require massive sacrifices. Making minor changes in the foods you eat can do the trick.
The fats in food are of three kinds: saturates, monounsaturates, and polyunsaturates. Saturates are found mostly in biscuits, cheese, cooking fats, hard margarine, pastry, pies, meat fat, full-fat milk and dairy products and chips. Some vegetable fats are also mainly saturates. Saturated fats are the most important kind of fat to reduce; the body doesn't need them and they may actually aggravate arthritis. Softer fats and oils have more mono- and polyunsaturates but just as many calories, so limiting them is still important to lose weight.

Animal fats such as lard are high in saturated fat; olive oil is rich in monounsaturates; sunflower oil is rich in polyunsaturates

**How to eat less fat**

To eat less fat, follow these rules:

- look out for and avoid 'invisible' fats in foods like biscuits, cakes, chocolate, pastry and savoury snacks – check the labels
- trim fat off any meat you eat
- always choose lean cuts of meat
- choose fish and poultry more often

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- use low-fat milk (skimmed or semi-skimmed)
- use low-fat spreads
- grill instead of frying
- if you do have the occasional fry-up, use a very small amount of oil
- fill up on bread, cereals, potatoes, fruit and vegetables
- look for low-fat snacks such as popcorn or fruit.

**Cut down on sugar**

Sugar contains only calories and has no other food value (so-called empty calories) so it can be cut down without any loss of nourishment. Eating 1 oz (28 grams) less sugar each day saves 112 calories!

Try not to add sugar to drinks and cereals. Although artificial sweeteners contain very few calories, it is better to get used to food being less sweet by not adding them to drinks. Dried fruit like raisins can be used to sweeten cereals and puddings; unlike sugar and artificial sweeteners, they also provide vitamins and minerals.

**Eat more fruit and vegetables**

The World Health Organisation recommends that we should have at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. This is to make sure that the body receives the important antioxidants and vitamins which it needs to protect it during the stress of disease. You can also get more fibre from eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, especially the brightly coloured varieties like carrots, tomatoes, beetroot, and broccoli. Remember you also get fibre from wholegrain versions of bread, cereals, pasta and rice. These foods are more filling and so will also help if you are trying to lose weight!