

[IMAGE]

Living With Arthritis Without Resorting to Drugs or Surgery

By Bill Reddy

Many arthritis sufferers are completely unaware of their treatment options beyond medication and surgery. Because of the recent controversies involving prescription drugs such as Vioxx and Bextra, both of which were pulled from the market a few years ago due to increased risk of heart attack and stroke, other options are desperately needed. This article will briefly introduce the various types of arthritis and what the latest research indicates for improving the condition.

A Primer on Arthritis

Arthritis is one of the oldest known afflictions and can affect virtually every part of the body, from the feet to the knees, back, shoulders and fingers. More than 50 million (about one in six) Americans suffer from arthritis. The most common types are rheumatoid arthritis (RA), osteoarthritis (OA) and gouty arthritis (GA).

Rheumatoid arthritis is three times more common in women than men, begins between the ages of 20 and 60, with peak activity between the ages of 35 and 45, and is considered an autoimmune disorder. The most common symptoms are small-joint discomfort, warmth, swelling and redness, limited range of motion, distortion and morning stiffness. RA is bilateral, meaning both left and right sides of the body are affected, and typically gets worse over time.

Smiling elderly woman. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Osteoarthritis, in contrast, affects the larger weight-bearing joints asymmetrically. Symptoms include local tenderness, joint cracking/grinding and dysfunction, and pain increasing with activity. Fifty percent of people over 50 years old suffer from OA. Osteophytes, or bone spurs, occur in the late stages of OA.

Gouty arthritis or "gout" is the formation of uric acid crystals in the small joints of the feet and hands, especially the big toe. Ninety percent of gout sufferers are overweight men who indulge in rich foods and alcohol.

What You Can Do

According to James Balch, MD, and Phyllis Balch, CNC, authors of *Prescription for Nutritional Healing*, dairy products, caffeine, citrus fruits, paprika, salt, tobacco and sugar should be reduced or eliminated from your diet, as these particular foods may increase joint inflammation. Additionally, nightshades (e.g., red, green and yellow bell peppers, eggplant, tomatoes, white flesh potatoes) should be avoided because they have a tendency to intensify arthritic symptoms. Foods containing sulfur, such as asparagus, eggs, garlic and onions, are important for the repair and rebuilding of bone, cartilage and connective tissue, and also aid in the absorption of calcium.

Other good foods include green, leafy vegetables (which supply vitamin K), fresh vegetables, non-acidic fresh fruits, whole grains, oatmeal, brown rice and fish. Fresh pineapple contains bromelain, a powerful natural anti-inflammatory agent, which works by stimulating the body's production of prostaglandins.

One of the most overlooked approaches to improve the discomfort associated with arthritis is hydration. In *Your Body's Many Cries for Water*, Dr. Batmanghelidj asserts that dehydration is responsible for the majority of joint pain in this country, and merely increasing water consumption will relieve the symptoms within two to three weeks. Depending on your level of activity, a good rule of thumb is to drink half of your weight in ounces. Thus, if you weigh 180 pounds, you should consume 90 ounces of pure, filtered water per day.

Other drugless methods for managing arthritis include:

- heat or cold, applied directly to the sore joint;
- weight reduction (reduces stress on weight-bearing joints);
- joint protection (splints or braces);
- stretching; and
- various forms of low-impact exercise.

Acupuncture is well-known in China for its effectiveness in treating arthritis. Practitioners use hair-thin, stainless-steel needles inserted in specific places on the body to accelerate the body's ability to heal joints. A 2002 study performed in England measured several parameters of knee osteoarthritis, including time to walk 50 meters, time to climb 20 steps and the overall level of pain when treated with acupuncture as compared to having no treatment. Patients who received acupuncture treatments over an eight-week period improved

in all of the parameters measured, compared with those with no treatment, who deteriorated in all categories. Additionally, a well-designed study performed by the University of Maryland concluded that acupuncture was 88 percent effective at improving knee osteoarthritis, as measured by analgesic consumption, range of motion and a number of other parameters.

Bottled water being poured into a glass. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Arthritis in any form can be a debilitating condition that prevents you from living the life you want. Rather than immediately accepting the dangerous side effects of drugs and risky surgeries, talk to your doctor about natural alternatives to keep your muscles and joints in optimal condition.

Rheumatoid arthritis

is three times more common in women than men, begins between the ages of 20 and 60, with peak activity between the ages of 35 and 45, and is considered an autoimmune disorder. The most common symptoms are small-joint discomfort, warmth, swelling and redness, limited range of motion, distortion and morning stiffness. RA is bilateral, meaning both left and right sides of the body are affected, and typically gets worse over time.

Osteoarthritis

affects the larger weight-bearing joints asymmetrically. Symptoms include local tenderness, joint cracking/grinding and dysfunction, and pain increasing with activity. Fifty percent of people over 50 years old suffer from OA. Osteophytes, or bone spurs, occur in the late stages of OA. Approximately 21 million Americans suffer from arthritis, accounting for one-quarter of all visits to primary care physicians and half of all nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) prescriptions.

Gouty arthritis

or "gout" is the formation of uric acid crystals in the small joints of the feet and hands. Ninety percent of gout sufferers are overweight men who indulge in rich foods and alcohol. Classic symptoms of gout include excruciating joint pain, swelling, redness, warmth and stiffness. The uric acid crystals in the joint can cause intense pain whenever the affected area is moved, and the inflamed tissues surrounding the joint can cause the skin to be swollen, tender and sore.

Bill Reddy was an aerospace engineer before becoming a licensed acupuncturist with practices in Annandale and Alexandria, Va. He is a board member of the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.

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