

## Patient Resources

### Dietary & Botanical Supplements for Arthritis

Most types of arthritis are chronic, and may not always be completely controlled by conventional treatments. For that reason, many individuals seek alternative therapies such as dietary and botanical supplements to provide additional relief.



Dietary and botanical supplements come in many forms including: tablets, capsules, powders, teas, extracts, and fresh or dried plants. Individuals tend to be comforted by supplements claiming to be “natural,” and may even consider such products safer and more effective than conventional medications. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true.

Supplements and herbal medicines contain active ingredients that can have a strong effect on the body, however, they are not regulated nor held to the same standard as conventional medicines. This could make them unsafe in certain situations and cause harm to your health. It is important that you discuss dietary and botanical supplements that you plan to take with your doctor to ensure your health and safety.

### Common Herbal Remedies for Arthritis

#### *Ginger*

Ginger is a more widely known supplement, as its root is frequently used for its flavoring or fragrance in foods, beverages, soaps and cosmetics. There is evidence that indicates ginger may help relieve nausea related to pregnancy, as well as cancer chemotherapy (in combination with conventional anti-nausea medication), however, there is no scientific evidence that supports its uses for other health reasons.

- **Uses:** Historically, ginger has been used in Greek, Roman, Arabic and Asian medicine to treat stomachaches, diarrhea, and nausea. Today, it is often used to treat post-surgery nausea; nausea caused by motion, chemotherapy or pregnancy; rheumatoid arthritis (RA); and osteoarthritis (OA).
- **Form:** Ginger can be found as a fresh or dried root, tablets, capsules, liquid extracts, and teas.
- **Side effects:** May cause mild side effects such as abdominal discomfort, heartburn, diarrhea, and gas.
- **Risks:** Individuals with gallstone disease should use caution as it may increase the flow of bile. There is no evidence of ginger interacting with medication, however, individuals

taking blood thinners should use caution. Additionally, women that are pregnant should consult with a health care provider before using ginger.

### *Turmeric\**

Turmeric is a plant related to ginger that is grown in India, Asia, and Central America. It is a common spice and a major ingredient in curry powder. Its active ingredients (curcuminoids) are yellow and often used to color foods and cosmetics.

There have been many studies researching the health effects of turmeric. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that turmeric helps to reduce inflammation. There are preliminary studies that have found curcuminoids in turmeric may have health benefits related to heart health, OA, and skin irritation caused by radiation treatments for breast cancer.

- **Uses:** Historically, turmeric has been used for breathing problems, rheumatism, serious pain and fatigue. Today, it is often used to relieve inflammation; arthritis; stomach, skin, liver and gallbladder problems; cancer; and other conditions.
- **Form:** The stems of turmeric are dried and made into capsules, tablets, teas, or liquid extracts. Turmeric powder is also made into a paste for skin conditions.
- **Side effects:** Turmeric may cause gastrointestinal problems if taken in high doses or used long-term.
- **Risks:** There are no known risks.

*\*Please note that Javanese turmeric is a different plant.*

### *Thunder God Vine*

Grown in China and Taiwan, Thunder God Vine is a perennial that has been used for hundreds of years as an herbal remedy for health. There have been a small number of studies that have evaluated the use of the oral version of this supplement for RA that indicate it may improve some RA symptoms.

In 2009, the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) funded a small study that compared the effects of an extract of thunder vine root to a conventional drug (sulfasalazine) for RA. This study found that participants' symptoms (e.g., joint pain and swelling, inflammation) improved significantly more with thunder god vine than with the drug.

In 2014, a published study from China compared thunder god vine to a conventional drug (methotrexate). Results indicate that both were comparably helpful in relieving RA symptoms, and that the combination of the herbal supplement and drug were better than

- **Uses:** Historically, it has been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat swelling caused by inflammation. Today, it is often used for autoimmune diseases, such as RA, multiple sclerosis (MS), and lupus.
- **Form:** The roots of thunder god vine are used to create liquid extracts as well as topical ointments.
- **Side effects:** May cause serious side effects including: decreased bone mineral content with long-term use, infertility, menstrual cycle changes, rashes, diarrhea, headache, and hair loss. This can be extremely poisonous if the extract is not prepared properly.
- **Risks:** The side effects of using thunder god vine are serious and the risk of using it may outweigh the benefits; consult your health care provider before beginning use.

### *Willow Bark Extract*

This supplement uses the bark of several varieties of willow tree to relieve pain, working similarly to aspirin. The effectiveness of willow bark has not been scientifically proven.

- **Uses:** Historically, individuals would chew willow bark to relieve pain and fever. Today, it is often used for pain that includes headaches, muscle pain, menstrual cramps, RA, OA, gout and ankylosing spondylitis. It is also used for fever, common cold, flu and weight loss.
- **Form:** The bark is often used to make liquid extract.
- **Side effects:** May increase the risk of bleeding in people with bleeding disorders; may reduce blood flow through kidneys, causing kidney failure in certain people; may cause serious allergic reactions to individuals with sensitivity to aspirin (e.g., people with asthma, stomach ulcers, diabetes, gout, hemophilia, hypoprothrombinemia, or kidney or liver disease); may increase risk in children of developing Reye's syndrome.
- **Risks:** Women that are pregnant, may become pregnant, or are breastfeeding should avoid using this supplement; willow bark contains chemicals that can enter breast milk and have harmful effects on the nursing infant.

### *Feverfew*

Feverfew can be found growing naturally through Europe, North America and South America. While individuals may use this supplement for many health reasons, research only suggests that it may help prevent migraine headaches.

- **Uses:** Historically, feverfew has been used for fevers, headaches, constipation, diarrhea, difficulty in labor, and dizziness. Today, it is often used for migraine headache prevention, problems with menstruation, RA, psoriasis, allergies, asthma, tinnitus (ringing or roaring sounds in the ears), dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and for intestinal parasites. In its topical form individuals use it for toothaches as well as a skin cleanser to reduce or prevent skin infections.
- **Form:** The dried leaves, flowers and stems are used to make capsules, tablets, liquid extracts, and teas.
- **Side effects:** May include nausea, digestive problems, and bloating. If fresh leaves are chewed, irritation and sores in the mouth may occur. Individuals that take this supplement for a long time and then stop have reported difficulty sleeping, headaches, anxiety, as well as stiff and painful muscles.
- **Risks:** Women that are pregnant or may become pregnant should avoid using this supplement as it may affect uterine contractions.

### *Cat's claw*

This herbal supplement got its name from its thorns that resemble a cat's claw. It can be found in tropical areas such as the Amazon rainforest and areas of Central and South America where it grows wild. Although it has been used for health purposes since the Inca civilization, there is no scientific evidence based on studies in people that supports the use of cat's claw for health purposes.

- **Uses:** Historically, cat's claw has been used for contraception, inflammation, cancer and viral infections, as well as to stimulate the immune system. Today, it is often used for viral infections such as herpes and HIV, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, arthritis, diverticulitis, peptic ulcers, colitis, gastritis, hemorrhoids, parasites and leaky bowel syndrome.
- **Form:** The bark and root of cat's claw are used to make liquid extracts, capsules, tablets and tea.
- **Side effects:** There are no known side effects.
- **Risks:** Women that are pregnant or may become pregnant should avoid using this supplement due to its past use for preventing and aborting pregnancy.

### *Stinging Nettle*

The leaves and stems of this plant have fine hairs that contain chemicals. When the plant comes in contact with skin, the chemicals are released often causing irritation, except when it comes into contact with a painful area of the body where it can actually decrease the original pain. Scientists are not certain, but believe the stinging nettle reduces the level of inflammatory chemicals in the body and interferes with the way the body transmits pain signals.

- **Uses:** Historically, stinging nettle has been used to treat painful muscles and joints, eczema, arthritis, gout and anemia. Today, it is often used to treat urinary problems during the early stages of an enlarged prostate, urinary infections, hay fever, joint pain, sprains and strains, tendonitis and insect bites.
- **Form:** Stinging nettle is available as dried leaf, freeze-dried leaf, liquid extract, capsules, tablets and root tincture, juice, or tea. It can also be found as ointment or cream.
- **Side effects:** May include mild stomachaches, fluid retention, sweating, diarrhea, and hives or rash (only with topical use). It may also alter the menstrual cycle and contribute to miscarriage.
- **Risks:** Women that are pregnant or may become pregnant should avoid using this supplement. Individuals with diabetes should consult their health care provider before using stinging nettle as it may interfere with diabetes management.

## Common Dietary Supplements for Arthritis

### *Fish oil*

There are two types of fish oils: omega-3 fatty acids and omega-6 fatty acids. Individuals with arthritis commonly use omega-3 fatty acids to relieve pain and joint tenderness, as they are said to contain anti-inflammatory properties, whereas omega-6 fatty acids are often associated with higher levels of inflammation.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has concluded that the use of fish oil, or other omega-3 supplements, for the treatment of RA may improve symptoms such as tender joints, morning stiffness and use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

- **Uses:** Fish oil is often used for heart health (e.g., heart disease, increasing “good” cholesterol, lowering blood pressure), weight loss, general eye health, depression, diabetes, osteoporosis, OA and chronic inflammation.
- **Form:** Fish oil is often found in gel capsules and liquid extract.
- **Side effects:** May include gastrointestinal distress and a fishy odor to the breath.
- **Risks:** May contain high levels of mercury or vitamin A, which can be toxic. Individuals that are taking blood thinners, blood pressure medication, or may undergo surgery should consult their health care provider before taking this supplement.

### *Glucosamine and Chondroitin*

These are two different substances, usually isolated from shellfish, that can be found in individual supplement form as well as combined supplement form. Glucosamine and chondroitin are naturally found in human joint tissue, and have shown anti-inflammatory effects in animals, however there is no evidence that these supplements will improve symptoms of RA.

- **Uses:** Individuals often use this supplement for OA
- **Form:** Glucosamine and chondroitin can be found in tablet, softgel, capsule and liquid juice form.
- **Side effects:** May include mild gastrointestinal symptoms.
- **Risks:** Individuals with asthma, diabetes, blood clotting disorder or shellfish allergies should consult their health care provider before taking this supplement.