Freedom of Movement
How To Maintain Healthy Joints

By Michele Ferchoff, ND

Chronic joint problems are a leading cause of disability among American adults. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that chronic joint trouble affects many more Americans than previously thought. The CDC survey released in October 2002 revealed that one in three adults — nearly 70 million people — regularly experience joint discomfort.

As well-engineered as joints are, they're not immune to wear and tear from an active life. The health, mobility, and function of joints can be compromised by injury, disease, excess stress, unhealthy dietary choices, and daily activity.

Joint health is critical to maintaining mobility as we age. Here are some of the risk factors of developing joint disease:

- Past injury to a joint
- Previous surgery to the joint
- History of infection in a joint
- History of improper diet and nutrition
- Obesity
- Lack of exercise
- History of intense exercise
- History of cigarettes and oral birth control pills use
- Congenital defect or weakness in a joint
- Gout

Maintaining Healthy Joints

To maintain healthy joints, it is important to take care of your general health through proper diet and exercise. Exercise is an important factor in joint health. Regular exercise can strengthen bones and muscles and help keep your weight in line. Research has shown that physical activity is both safe and beneficial for people with chronic joint conditions. Exercise helps keep joints flexible and the bones, cartilage, and muscles that support joints strong and healthy. Elimination is also important for maintaining joint health.

Utilizing Nutrition for Joint Repair

When damage and degeneration has occurred to joint tissues, proper nutrition can support the renewal process. Glucosamine, vitamins B and C, and some minerals are particularly useful for joint support.

Glucosamine helps make up proteoglycans, which give cartilage its springy resilience. Taking Glucosamine speeds up the production of the cartilage matrix. The body naturally makes its own Glucosamine though the rate may be limited by diet or age. Most Glucosamine in the body is found in tendons, ligaments and cartilage. Additionally, vitamin C assists in making collagen and is very helpful in reversing joint degeneration. There is evidence that some of the B vitamins play a part in joint repair. Minerals, such as boron and manganese, are helpful in preventing the development of arthritis.

Reducing Inflammation and Pain Management

Nutritional deficiencies can exacerbate pain and inflammation by slowing down the healing process of injured tissues. It is well established that deficiencies in zinc and vitamins C and A can delay wound healing. Deficiencies in minerals, such as calcium and magnesium, also aggravate joint pain. Eating foods high in beta-carotene, such as spinach, kale, carrots, alfalfa, buckwheat, broccoli, tomatoes, squash, sweet potato, pumpkin, and beets, can correct these nutritional deficiencies. Oils of the omega-3 are essential for counteracting inflammation. They are required for producing the prostaglandins which reduce inflammation. Another powerful anti-inflammatory is vitamin E. Many of the above are found in food supplements, which can assist in correcting these deficiencies and help maintain good joint health.

In addition to foods, many herbs are used for pain relief and joint support. Many herbs have the same biochemical pathways as non-opiate pain-relieving drugs. These herbs also provide prostaglandin-suppressing, antispasmodic, sedative, and antidepressant qualities.

Willow bark (Salix alba) was used for treating pain by the ancient Greeks more than 2,400 years ago. Investigation of salicin, a pain-relieving constituent in willow bark, led to the discovery of aspirin in 1899. The most important active constituent is salicin, but other anti-inflammatory constituents also appear in the willow bark.

Boswellia is an effective anti-inflammatory and anti-arthritic. Boswellia has been known to reduce joint swelling and maintain blood supply to inflamed joints and mobility as well as reduce pain due to stiffness in the joints. Research has identified specific active anti-inflammatory ingredients in this herb, which are commonly referred to as boswellic acids. Boswellic acids improve blood supply to the joints and maintain the integrity of blood vessels.

Horse chestnut is a seed extract. One of its main active components is aescin, which may reduce inflammation and increase the tone of veins. It also reduces the release of enzymes, which are typically increased in chronic diseases of the vein. Other compounds in horse chestnut generally increase the tone of blood vessels and decrease their perme-

ability.

Food Allergies

Diet may affect joint health when masked intolerance to certain foods is present, commonly called "food allergies." Many types of arthritic conditions are not caused by allergies, but aggravated by them. Allergy arthritis is brought on, or made worse, by an allergic reaction to foods, food additives, preservatives, chemicals, and pollution. An early medical study done in the 1930s discussed the possibility of immunoglobin-E (IgE) antibodies lodging in a joint and subsequently being attacked by white blood cells, causing painful swelling in a joint. Some people have an overabundance of IgE from food allergies, which causes them arthritic pain.

The treatment of food allergies can be complex. Food allergies are often treated from several directions at the same time, such as eliminating allergens, strengthening the patient nutritionally, and modifying the patient's immune response.

Special diets are the most commonly used treatment for food allergies. If the patient is allergic to only one or two foods, eliminating the offending foods may be the only treatment necessary. When a patient has multiple food allergies, the offending foods must be eliminated and all other foods should be eaten at intervals of four to five days or longer. This is know as a "rotation" or "rotary diversified" diet.

Digestive enzymes help you break down your food into smaller less allergenic molecules, thus decreasing your reaction to the foods you eat. Vitamin C is a general anti-allergy supplement. Vitamin C helps stabilize mast cells so they are less likely to release histamine. It also strengthens the immune system.

The maintenance of joint health can be achieved through a multifaceted approach. Making sure appropriate diet and exercise is maintained, food allergies are eliminated and nutrients specific to joints are supplemented, will help eliminate obstacles to cure. Adhering to a plan of overall wellness will keep you mobile for years to come.

About The Author

Michele Ferchoff earned her B.S. in biology from the University Wisconsin, La Crosse and then attended the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine and Health Sciences, one of four accredited naturopathic medical schools in the country, where she graduated as a N.M.D. in 2002. Michele has several years of practical and clinical experience. She was selected as one of two residents for the National College of Naturopathic Medicine/Standard Process residency program, the first naturopathic residency in Wisconsin's history, beginning in September 2002. Michele is one of only five naturopathic physicians in Wisconsin who have graduated from a four-year accredited naturopathic medical school.

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