

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Nutrition

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that affects the joints and can even affect some of the internal organs in the body. Its symptoms include mild to severe pain and swelling in the joints, which may come and go. RA is treated using medicines to control pain and swelling. Much controversy exists about whether the foods you eat or do not eat can affect your symptoms. We know for sure that eating a healthy diet is important to maintaining a healthy weight. At this point, no evidence has shown that anything you eat will stop your RA from getting worse.

A healthy diet

Experts recommend eating a diet that meets recommendations of MyPyramid.gov, the food guide pyramid. In a nutshell, MyPyramid recommends a focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods, with lean meats, fish, and poultry or meat alternatives daily. It is recommended that you limit added sugars (sodas and other sweet beverages, cakes, cookies, pies, candy, etc) and high-fat foods to help keep your heart healthy and prevent weight gain.

Meal suggestions and preparation tips

When you have RA, you may tire easily or have trouble preparing or eating food, depending on the severity of your symptoms. For that reason, some RA patients are at risk for unexpected weight loss or nutrient deficiencies. Following MyPyramid.gov can help assure that you are getting the nutrients you need to stay healthy.

Eating healthy is not hard. Follow these suggestions:

- Rely on prewashed and packaged fruits and vegetables, if you can afford these items
- Purchase deli foods, such as rotisserie chicken
- Cook double of everything, and eat leftovers a few nights each week
- Use canned vegetables and beans, but rinse before cooking to remove excess sodium
- Enjoy sandwiches made with lean meats, such as turkey and ham, adding vegetables such as lettuce, tomato, and cucumber
- Rely on takeout or frozen meals, if necessary, from time to time
- Make sure to include fruits and vegetables at each meal, if you can

Nightshade foods

It is tempting to think that avoiding some foods can help relieve symptoms of RA. This idea is not a new one, but no evidence exists to prove that foods from the nightshade family (potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant, and sweet and hot peppers, to name a few) make your symptoms worse. Because RA symptoms can wax and wane suddenly and without apparent cause, it is easy to tie them to foods. If you seem to notice a connection to certain foods, you may choose to avoid them. However, use caution when avoiding certain foods, because this could cause you to miss certain nutrients that your body needs for good health.

Fish oil capsules

Fish oils are part of a class of foods called omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3s appear to have an effect on the inflammatory response in the body. Some studies have shown an improvement in RA symptoms over the short term with a diet high in omega-3s and/or fish oil supplements. Eating fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, herring, and tuna, two times per week is suggested for good health, not just for treatment of RA. Whether taking or not taking fish oil supplements will help is controversial and is not scientifically proven. If you choose to try supplements, watch out for side effects, such as an upset stomach or fishy taste or odor, and remember RA symptoms can come and go quickly. Use caution when deciding whether improvements are linked to your diet or supplements.

It is possible that future research will show that all omega-3-containing foods can reduce RA symptoms. In addition to fatty fish, other good sources of omega-3s include:

- Flaxseed
- Walnuts
- Soy
- Canola oils

Using these foods as part of a healthy diet will not hurt you, and it might just help!

References

American Dietetic Association. *ADA Nutrition Care Manual*. Available online to subscribers at: www.nutritioncaremanual.org. Accessed June 3, 2008.

Mahan LK, Escott-Stump S. *Krause's Food and Nutrition Therapy*. St. Louis, MO: Saunders Elsevier; 2008.

Review date 7/08
G-0674