

NATURAL ALTERNATIVES IN MANAGING OSTEOARTHRITIS

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Millions of Canadians suffer from osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis. Because of its prevalence and the frequent disability that accompanies disease in the knee and hip, osteoarthritis accounts for more trouble with climbing stairs and walking than any other disease, and is the most common reason for total hip and knee replacement surgeries. It is one of the most common disabling ailments in our society, but modern therapeutic advancements have revealed successful and alternative natural treatments for osteoarthritis. A wellness approach examines some of these alternative and natural treatments, which include nutritional supplementation, exercise prescription, and therapeutic interventions that may be of direct benefit to you or someone you know.

It is important to first understand what osteoarthritis is. Many joints in our body have smooth cartilage surfaces that glide against each other, which allow 2 or more opposing bones to move freely and perform specific movements. A joint becomes arthritic when there is wearing down of these cartilage surfaces, and a change in the composition of the bone underneath the cartilage occurs. Soft tissue structures in and around the joint are also affected, which often leads to muscle tightness and weakness. An arthritic joint does not mechanically function like it is supposed to, and as result pain and local inflammation occur. Weight-bearing joints are most commonly affected, but osteoarthritis can affect any area of the body, including the hands, neck, and low back. The causes of osteoarthritis are many, and can include but are not limited to advancing age, genetic predisposition, decreased bone density, mechanical overload from occupational and recreational activities, obesity, poor dietary habits, lack of exercise, and direct joint injury.

Many people rely exclusively on anti-inflammatory drugs as their only approach to managing osteoarthritis. These drugs, referred to as NSAIDS, include common over the counter drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen. These drugs have been identified as potentially producing intestinal tract ulcers, causing internal bleeding in 10-30% of long-term users, and erosions of the stomach lining and intestinal tract in 30-50% of users. In the U.S., these drugs are associated with 10,000 – 20,000 deaths per year. Even the new COX-2 inhibitor drugs such as Vioxx and Celebrex may only reduce intestinal tract damage by 50%. NSAIDS also encourage the erosion of joint cartilage, which accelerates the arthritic process and causes liver and kidney damage with long-term use. Every effort should be made to use these drugs sparingly to minimize the risk of adverse side effects.



The natural nutritional supplementation of choice these days for osteoarthritis has become glucosamine. Glucosamine is the raw material from which the body makes important components of its cartilage. Respected medical journals such as *The Lancet*

and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* have published research articles highlighting the proven benefits of glucosamine for arthritic patients. Glucosamine supplementation has repeatedly been proven to be extremely safe and effective in doses of 1500mg per day. Most reputable wellness centers carry joint support products with added herbs and compounds that help intensify the positive effects of glucosamine. Unlike conventional anti-inflammatory drugs, listed below are natural compounds that help fight inflammation, and have not been found to damage the intestinal tract, the liver, or the kidneys and do not accelerate joint cartilage damage. These include: *curcumin, boswellia, white willow bark extract, ginger root extract, bromelain, quercetin, and MSM.*

Poor dietary habits can also contribute to arthritic symptoms in a number of ways. Eating foods high in trans fats, and the over-ingestion of corn oil, sunflower seed oil, and safflower seed oil tends to promote inflammatory pathways in the body. The analogy here is like throwing gasoline on a smoldering fire. Including healthy omega-3 fats in your diet has the opposite affect. Individuals with poor dietary habits also tend to be overweight and may not get enough exercise. For every extra pound of weight that someone carries, they put an extra 3 to 5 pounds of stress on a weight bearing joint. Regular exercise can allow an individual to keep their weight down, and their muscles and joints flexible and strong. Being physically fit also allows us to withstand occupational and recreational stresses to our body more efficiently, therefore decreasing the chances of joint injury.

Natural therapies can also be very beneficial in helping people with arthritis cope. Chiropractic care allows for the normal movements of joints to be restored by influencing the joints directly, the surrounding muscles, and the nervous system. Massage therapy can help those with tight and weak muscles, which will also allow joints to move through their normal range of motion. Acupuncture is a treatment option that is growing in popularity. It helps to decrease pain, restore normal muscle and joint motion, and stimulate healing and blood flow to arthritic or injured areas. Chiropractic, massage, and acupuncture can be used individually or in combination with each other, and have clinically shown to relieve arthritic symptoms more successfully than outdated treatment forms such as magnetic field therapy.

With advancing treatment options available to those suffering from arthritic pain, there appears to be hope for the millions afflicted with this disease. Individuals suffering from arthritic pain now have a broader range of natural treatment options that can substantially improve their pain levels and quality of life. Arthritic pain does not have to be viewed as an inevitable process of life. There are choices that are readily available that can have a significantly positive impact.

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