

## Use Both Science and Nature to Fight Arthritis

Arthritis is extremely common, and among the leading causes of disability. Technically, arthritis means inflammation of the joints, and therefore any disease that causes joints to become inflamed qualifies. The most common variety is osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease, associated with aging and wear and tear on the cartilage that lines the joints. Rheumatoid is a sometimes severe, sometimes mild form of arthritis in which the immune system attacks the joint lining. There are many other varieties, too, ranging from acute infections, to immune diseases, to metabolic disorders. All in all, most adults eventually suffer to some extent from some form of arthritis. Now, the good news. There are many ways of intervening to prevent the functional limitations arthritis can cause, and subdue the pain. Options include conventional medicines, natural treatments, physical therapy, and surgery.

The standard treatment for osteoarthritis tends to be the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, a class that

includes familiar names like Motrin, Advil, Alleve, Naprosyn, and others. These medications reduce both pain and inflammation, and are fairly reliable. But they can be hard on the kidneys, and even harder on the stomach. They all have a tendency to cause ulcers. However, in individuals without a history of ulcers, the NSAIDs can be used safely, and often provide good relief.

Unlike the NSAIDs, Tylenol does not cause ulcers, although it can be dangerous to the liver in patients with liver disease or with excess alcohol consumption. Tylenol has been compared to NSAIDs in a study of osteoarthritis, and found to be comparably effective. But what works well for one person may not work at all for another. That's why it's important to have options.

One of the newest options is the new class of medications called COX 2 inhibitors. The approved medication in this class is Celebrex. Like NSAIDs,



## Use Both Science and Nature to Fight Arthritis

Celebrex reduces both inflammation and pain. Unlike NSAIDs, Celebrex does not seem to cause ulcers. Of course, all medications have potential toxicities (as do all natural remedies). Celebrex is available by prescription only.

Among the natural treatments for arthritis, the one best supported by evidence for osteoarthritis is glucosamine sulfate. Glucosamine is derived from the shell (exoskeleton) of shrimp, and contains key components of articular cartilage (the cartilage that lines joints). Studies have clearly shown that glucosamine sulfate is incorporated into cartilage after ingestion. The supplement appears to be quite safe. It has been compared to NSAIDs in studies of acceptable quality, and found to be at least as good. NSAIDs work right away, glucosamine generally takes a month or more to make a difference. Natural, yes. Miracle, no. Glucosamine does not work for everyone. However, it works often enough to be worth a try. The dose is 500mg, 3 times a day. The other natural treatment with some fairly good supporting evidence is for rheumatoid arthritis. The omega-3 fatty acids reduce inflammation. This type of fat is abundant in fish, but also found highly

concentrated in flaxseed oil. There is evidence that dietary supplementation with one tablespoon of flaxseed oil per day can reduce inflammation and pain in rheumatoid arthritis. Such a supplement may contribute to good health in other ways, too, although saturated fat should be taken out of the diet to avoid calorie excess and weight gain.

Regular, low impact exercise is generally beneficial to arthritic joints. Physical therapy can be helpful. More toxic medications and surgery, reserved for more severe cases, can be of great help under the right circumstances. With an open mind, a helpful doctor, and patience, you can generally find a regimen that controls pain and keeps you on the go.

David L. Katz, MD, MPH

*Preventive Medicine Column*

Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center  
130 Division Street · Derby, Connecticut 06418  
Main: 203-732-1A0K (1265)  
E mail: [CATS@yalegriffinprc.org](mailto:CATS@yalegriffinprc.org)  
Website: [www.yalegriffinprc.org](http://www.yalegriffinprc.org)

