

Straight Talk

Alternative Treatments for Arthritis



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Will alternative treatments work for me?

Many people who try alternative therapies report an improvement in their symptoms - but understand that this is not the same thing as saying the improvement is caused by the therapy. Consider the fact that many of the people who try alternative therapies may not even have arthritis - that is why an accurate diagnosis from a joint specialist is so important. According to the Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation, at any given point, approximately one-third of people with rheumatoid arthritis are entering a normal remission period, another third are getting worse, and another third report stable symptoms. Thus, if this group is given any kind of therapy or treatment, around one-third are going to report an improvement.

When a new prescription or over-the-counter medication is evaluated, it must go through an extensive review system involving medical schools, research institutions and government regulatory agencies before a claim of benefit can be made. This is often not the case for alternative treatments and therapies. Some therapies have been proven to be ineffective in reducing arthritis pain, while others have not been adequately evaluated.

Alternative or complementary treatments

Alternative treatments are those therapies or treatments that are outside the traditional domain of established medical science. Some people prefer the term "complementary treatments" as they are usually used in conjunction with traditional medications and treatments.

Why do so many people with arthritis try them?

There is no cure for arthritis, and for many, arthritis is an unpredictable and chronic illness. Add the fact that conventional treatments can be ineffective and carry with them significant side effects and it's not surprising that many arthritis sufferers turn to alternative treatments.

Common alternative treatments for arthritis

Examples of the alternative treatments that are often marketed to arthritis sufferers include, but are not limited to:

- Nutritional supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin
- Megavitamins
- Magnets
- Chiropractic manipulation
- Acupuncture
- Homeopathy - the administration of very small doses of medications that in higher doses might cause illness or symptoms
- Massage

Popular alternative treatments for arthritis

• **Glucosamine Sulfate** – Studies so far are promising, but remain controversial as many of the studies involved small numbers of people, or had other design flaws. Most medical experts agree that glucosamine is relatively safe - though as with any nutritional supplement, your doctor should be made aware that you are using it, as there may be interactions with other medications. For example, glucosamine may affect blood glucose metabolism, so people with diabetes need to discuss this with their doctor. In addition, those with shellfish allergies are often told to avoid glucosamine.

• **Chondroitin Sulfate** – Though often combined with glucosamine, chondroitin is not as well studied. Some claim that it helps in building up the synovial fluid - the fluid that helps to lubricate and nourish cartilage - though this has not been proven. If you decide to take chondroitin, inform your doctor, as it may interact with blood thinners such as Coumadin®.

• **SAM-e** – It is also known as S-adenosylmethionine. One large study of this supplement has shown promising results in its ability to reduce pain and inflammation, though other studies are inconclusive.

• **Herbal Supplements** – Various herbal supplements (including curcumin, evening primrose, and ginger) have been promoted to help arthritis sufferers. No conclusive studies have been published on their effectiveness.

• **Shark Cartilage** – At one time, it was thought that sharks did not get cancer - hence the belief that shark cartilage was a cancer fighter. It has also been promoted to maintain cartilage health in humans. Well, sharks do get cancer, and studies so far show shark cartilage is of no benefit in either cancer prevention or as an arthritis treatment.

• **Acupuncture** – While medical experts and doctors do not understand how acupuncture works, many arthritis sufferers report that acupuncture is beneficial in relieving symptoms. A large NIH (National Institutes of Health) study to determine the safety and effectiveness of acupuncture for treating osteoarthritis is currently in progress.

• **Magnets** – Throughout history, magnets have been promoted to provide pain relief and treat conditions ranging from epilepsy to diarrhea. Today, magnets can be found integrated into shoes, wraps and braces, and can range in cost from a few dollars to several hundred dollars. A number of scientific studies have been completed, but so far, no conclusive evidence exists that magnet therapy helps relieve arthritis pain.



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What could it hurt to try?

Besides the fact that you may be spending money on treatments that may not help or have been proven to be ineffective, there are a number of things to consider before deciding to try an alternative therapy or treatment. First, please discuss it with your doctor BEFORE you start. As mentioned, there may be known interactions between supplements and the prescription or over-the-counter medications you may be taking. While many alternative treatments are unproven, you do want to be sure that the treatment won't harm you. Remember, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate the claims made on the packages, nor the accuracy of what is on the label.

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