



# Rheumatoid arthritis

**R**heumatoid arthritis (RA), the chronic, proliferative form of arthritis, causes inflammation and, if left untreated, can lead to deformities and disability. The conventional treatment of RA is a delicate balance between the effects of the toxic drugs like non-steroidal anti-inflammatories and antirheumatic medication and the ravages of the disease.

Happily, there are many scientifically established natural treatments are out there—and all with a good safety record.

## Fasting and dietary therapy

A gluten-free, vegan diet has been consistently successful in treating RA (Scand J Rheumatol, 1996; 56: 421-9; Am J Clin Nutr, 1992; 56: 762; Scand J Rheumatol, 1983; 12: 161-5).

Other studies show encouraging effects for fasting followed by a vegetarian (not vegan) diet. Meta-analysis of the data from four such RA studies indicates long-term improvements in pain and related outcomes (Forsch Komplementaermed Klass Naturheilk, 2000; 7: 48).

A Norwegian study showed that switching to vegetarian foods normalized dietary fatty acids and significantly reduced inflammation. Patients were allowed only vegetable soups, garlic, herbal teas and vegetable juices for the first 10 days. Thereafter, the diet was gluten-free, and meat was allowed sparingly only every second day. For the first three months, citrus fruits, salt, refined sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, cola, strong spices, alcohol, milk and milk products were strictly excluded (Bartram T. *Bartram's Encyclopaedia of Herbal Medicine*. London: Robinson Publishing, 1998: 372).

## Homeopathy

Six years ago, a review of three rigorous randomized clinical trials of classical homeopathic treatments of RA, involving 226 patients (Rheum Dis Clin North Am, 2000; 26: 117-23) showed that individually tailored homeopathic remedies worked twice as well as a placebo.

Proprietary homeopathic preparations have also used paloondo, a Mexican plant familiar to the Aztecs, which has long been used in small quantities for RA. In Austria, Euretín and Paloondon-Dragées, two patent homeopathic medicines based on the Mexican plant, are presently licensed in the EU. Two placebo-controlled Hahnemannian provings (homeopathy's basic testing process), conducted by the formulator of Paloondon-Dragées using a variety of homeopathic potencies for a number of weeks, produced 'arthromuscular rheumatism', showing that the treatment worked (Allg Homoeopath Z, 1970; 6: 241-5).

## Phytotherapy

Gamma-linolenic acid (GLA) can also help. In two randomized clinical trials, significant clinical benefits were observed with borage (*Borago officinalis*), a rich source of GLA, compared with placebo (Ann Intern Med, 1993; 119: 867-73; Arthritis Rheum, 1996; 39: 1808-17).

Two randomized clinical trials of high quality suggest that

*Tripterygium wilfordii* (thunder god vine) has anti-inflammatory properties and is effective in reducing the signs and symptoms of RA (Chin Med J, 1989; 102: 327-32; Chung-Kuo Chung Hsi I Chieh Ho Tsa Chih, 1996; 16: 10-3; J Tradit Chin Med, 1983; 3: 125-9).

In the US, when Desert Pride Herbal Food Tablets (saponin extract from yucca plants) was compared against a placebo, those taking the herbal had 61 per cent less pain, swelling and stiffness compared with 22 per cent in those taking the placebo. Some patients improved within days or weeks (J Appl Nutr, 1975; 27: 45-50).

## Relaxation therapy

Muscle relaxation training can also help. A randomized clinical trial involving 68 RA patients who underwent 30 minutes of relaxation twice a week for 10 weeks showed significant improvements in both function and wellbeing (Scand J Rheumatol, 1999; 28: 47-53).

## Nutritional therapy

In one randomized trial, three-quarters of patients improved with *Perna canaliculus* (green-lipped mussel) as either 1150 mg/day of mussel powder or 210 mg/day of a lipid extract (Complement Ther Med, 1998; 6: 122-6).

Fish oil, rich in eicosapentaenoic (EPA) and docosahexaenoic (DHA) acids, is anti-inflammatory. Several randomized clinical trials have clearly demonstrated the clinical benefit of taking a regular supplement of fish oil (Semin Arthritis Rheum, 1992; 21: 368-75).

Bromelain (an enzyme from the pineapple plant) can reduce RA inflammation and the amount of steroids needed. In one trial, patients were able to substitute "small maintenance doses of enteric-coated bromelain" for steroids. Joint swelling also substantially improved (Penn Med J, 1964; 67: 27-30).

For patients taking methotrexate, patients should supplement with folic acid as the drug rapidly depletes the body's stores (Br J Rheumatol, 1995; 34: 1172-4).

## Ayurvedic medicine

*Curcuma longa* (turmeric) has long been used in this Indian system of medicine for joint inflammation; the yellow pigment curcumin appears to be the active component. A double-blind study showed curcumin to work as well as phenylbutazone for improving morning stiffness, walking ability and joint swellings (Ind J Med Res, 1980; 71: 632-4).

## Osteopathic manipulative therapy

Good osteopathic care can modify the course of RA and may even lead to remission. When joints are no longer inflamed, heat, friction, hot wet packs, stretching, exercise, support and passive articulation of the affected joints have been shown to substantially improve the disorder (Br J Gen Pract, 1993; 43: 15-8).

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