



Managing your **weight**

Being a healthy weight can ease arthritis symptoms.
Minal Chande looks at how to lose those extra pounds

Slurping litres of cabbage soup or nibbling cookies instead of meals – it can be tempting to look for a quick fix to manage your weight. Fad diets may lead to fast weight loss but they are hard to maintain over a long period of time and often do not include vital nutrients.

The basic principle for losing weight and keeping it off is to have a well-balanced diet and exercise regularly. Even a small weight loss can help to reduce arthritis pain and improve mobility.

Carrying excess weight

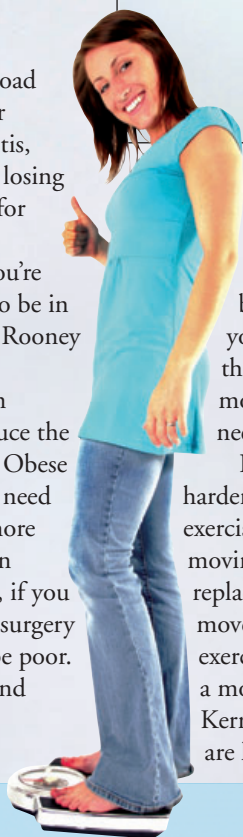
Being overweight can increase the load carried by the joints by around four times. 'It worsens the pain of arthritis, irrespective of the site of arthritis – losing weight can make a difference even for something like hand arthritis,' says Catherine Collins, a dietitian. 'If you're fighting arthritis your body needs to be in tip top condition,' believes Dennis Rooney who has rheumatoid arthritis.

Maintaining a healthy weight can prevent joint deterioration and reduce the need for joint replacement surgery. Obese women are 10 times more likely to need knee replacements and 2-3 times more likely to need hip replacements than women of a healthy weight. In fact, if you are overweight you may be refused surgery in some areas as the outcome will be poor.

Elaine Wilcox has fibromyalgia and has noticed a link between her weight and her symptoms. 'The



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more weight I put on, the more my muscles are in pain.'

To achieve a healthy bodyweight you need to balance the energy intake in your diet with the energy used through activity. If you take in more energy than your body needs it will be converted to fat.

People with arthritis may find it harder to burn calories through exercise due to pain and difficulty moving around. 'Before my hip replacements, it was very difficult to move around. I found other ways to exercise – I used walking sticks and a mobility scooter,' says Patricia Kerr, who has osteoarthritis. If you are less active, it is the small

changes to your diet that will make a difference to your weight.

Speak to your doctor before you start a weight loss programme. As well as advising you on safe ways to manage your weight, they can sometimes offer referral to a dietitian, exercise or slimming programme. Elaine went to her GP who gave her a general eating plan, which she adapted to suit her.

You are what you eat

To lose weight you need to consume fewer calories than your body needs. 'Cut down by 500 calories a day, which averages out to 1 pound of fat a week. You could cut out your daily chocolate bar or second helping of dinner,' says dietitian Catherine. Marie MacLeod, who has ankylosing spondylitis and osteoarthritis, has done just this. 'I've cut out having biscuits with coffee,' she says.

A healthy diet is one that is: high in fruit and vegetables; high in starch and fibre; low in fatty foods and salt; and low in added sugars. If you are trying to lose weight fruits/vegetables should make up half of your plate; carbohydrates a quarter; and protein a quarter. Take a multivitamin to ensure that you are not missing out on any essential nutrients. Dennis says that his diet is quite straightforward. 'I stay away from greasy food and eat a lot of fruits and vegetables.'

DIET TIPS

- Beware food/drink labelled low/reduced fat or diet as this can be high in sugar and salt.
- Avoid fad or starvation diets – you need a healthy eating plan you can stick to for life.
- Have smaller portions of fatty foods but go larger on vegetables.
- Eat slowly and do not do something else at the same time.
- Pack up leftovers before you sit down to avoid second helpings.
- Avoid having too many and too large snacks.



Fill up your plate with a wide variety of vegetables

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Carbohydrates are often thought of by dieters as bad news but they are the healthiest source of energy. Try to eat wholemeal or wholegrain varieties of bread, rice and pasta as they provide energy for longer so will make you feel fuller.

Make sure you get enough protein in your diet. 'As you get older you need more protein as your body is less efficient at making and repairing muscle. It is important to retain muscle bulk as this helps to support your joints. Try to avoid low protein snacks such as a slice of toast. Add egg, cheese or fish to boost your protein intake,' says Catherine. Protein also has the advantage of making you feel fuller.

Fat has twice as many calories as protein or carbohydrate. To reduce your consumption of fat: use olive or rapeseed oil instead of butter for cooking; use skimmed or semi-skimmed milk; buy lean cuts of meat and grill instead of frying; and add more vegetables and less meat to your recipes. Look out for hidden fats in foods like biscuits, cakes, and savoury snacks. Sugar contains only calories and no nutrients so try using fruit to sweeten cereals and puddings instead.

According to Catherine, snacks are a common pitfall. 'Snacking habits are a big problem for people with arthritis. If you're housebound, bored, or waking up at night in pain, it is tempting to snack as a distraction.'

She suggests limiting yourself to three meals and three snacks a day. 'A snack portion should be 120 calories. That is a two-finger Kit Kat, a packet of Snack a Jacks, or a small bowl of cereal. Choose healthy snacks such as fruit instead of chocolate.'

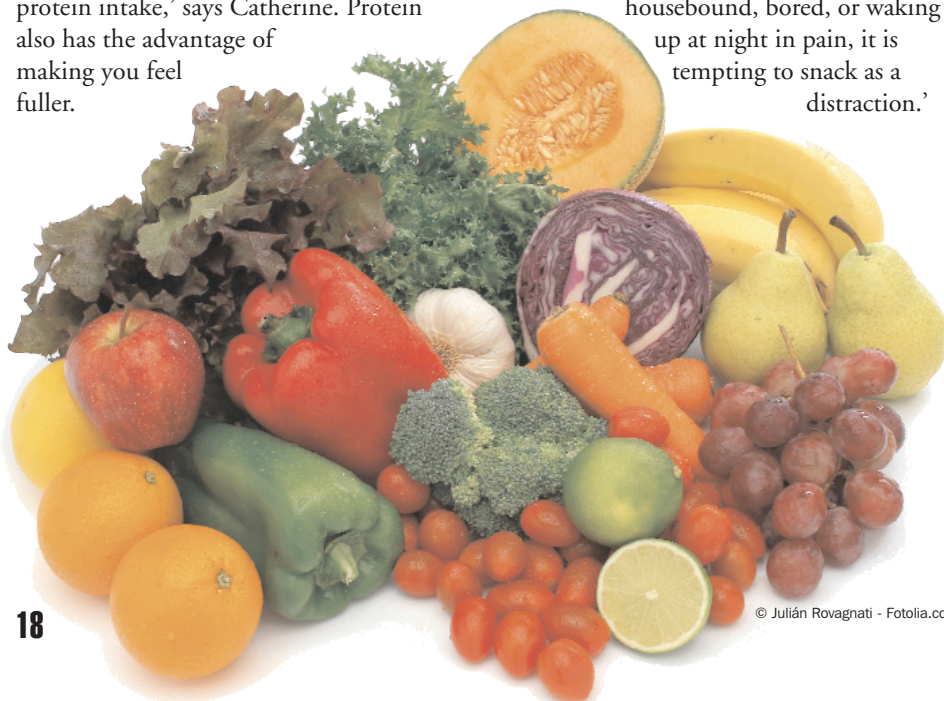
Portion size is another factor. 'A good portion size would be one of the following: cooked meat the size of a deck of cards; two eggs; cheese the size of a matchbox; a mug full of cooked rice or pasta; four new potatoes the size of eggs; or a jacket potato the size of your hand,' says Catherine.

Another way to limit dietary intake is to plan meals and keep a food diary. 'A food diary allows you to see where you are going wrong. I still note my weight each month,' says Elaine. For help with servings sizes and eating plans, see the British Dietetic Association's Weight Wise website: www.bdaweightwise.com

'If you are trying to lose weight, women should aim for 1,400 calories and men 1,600 calories. This is the minimum – if you are sticking to this and still not losing weight speak to your doctor,' says Catherine.

Keep on moving

In terms of losing weight you will be more effective if you combine watching what you eat with some regular movement. 'Exercise



burns calories, and an activity like swimming boosts muscle tone and in turn increases your metabolic rate, which means you will lose weight faster,' says dietitian Catherine.

People with arthritis can worry about damaging their joints by exercising, but in fact keeping active strengthens the muscles surrounding the joints, which reduces further deterioration. As you get older you naturally lose muscle bulk and strength so the need for exercise becomes even greater. 'I have to make an effort to exercise as sometimes I know it will hurt. Swimming keeps my muscles toned, which makes a lot of difference to my fibromyalgia. I try to do what I can manage plus a bit more,' says Elaine.

To protect your joints, start off slowly and take care not to overdo it as that can lead to pain. If you are in pain before you start exercise, focus on a different part of the body that day. Though if you have severe pain during exercise you should stop. If you have pain after exercise you have probably overdone it so try another less impactful activity. Read Arthritis Care's booklet *Exercise and Arthritis* for information on safe forms of exercise for people with arthritis.

Find something you enjoy as you are more likely to do it regularly. If you are struggling to stay motivated try exercising with friends or signing up to a charity walk. Arthritis Care has a range of events for everyone – see page 36. Focus on what weight loss will enable you to do – for



If you find an activity you enjoy, you are more likely to stick at it

instance, an improvement in your mobility may mean you can walk into town once a week.

You could try using a pedometer to measure any movement you make. 'Even if it's just getting out of a chair and walking to the toilet, measuring that will help get your confidence back. On good days, try to increase gradually and as the weight comes off you will be able to do more. If you are

trying to lose weight, do an extra 500-1,000 steps a day,' says Catherine. Keep an exercise log, remembering that everyday activities, such as mopping the floor, burn calories. 'I'm on my feet most of the day around the house,' says Marie.

Set yourself flexible but realistic goals – for example, that you will walk 10 minutes a day but if you are having a bad day you can skip that day and add an extra 10 minutes on a good day. Try to focus your goals on what you are actually able to control – that you will swim once a week rather than losing five pounds.

Marie suggests building up slowly. 'After my hip replacement, I built up from going to the bottom of the drive, to walking to the post box half a mile away.'

What happens if you have been exercising and watching your diet but the pounds refuse to shift? Although every 3,500 calories burnt equates to 1 pound of weight loss in theory, you may at times exercise without losing weight. For example, swimming for 30 minutes a day can burn off around 200 calories but the chocolate croissant you had for breakfast contained a whopping 400 calories. See the box for some tips.

If you are expecting the pounds to drop off by next week, it is not going to happen. Sensible weight loss involves making small changes that you can stick to for a long time. **an**

EXERCISE TIPS

If the pounds aren't coming off.

- Gradually increase the amount you do – an extra 15 minutes to your daily walk equates to a loss of 50 calories.
- Vary the type of exercise so that you work out a range of muscle groups.
- After a long cycle or swim, do not eat a huge meal and cancel out any calories you have burnt off – drink a few glasses of water first as you may actually be thirsty rather than hungry.
- Your body continues to burn calories after a workout as long as you keep moving, so try not to collapse on the sofa.