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Pain Guidelines Ignored

Despite recommendations to treat back pain conservatively, the number of people being prescribed powerful painkillers or referred for surgery and other expensive care has increased in recent years, according to a new study.

“This is kind of concerning,” said Dr. Steven Cohen, an anesthesiologist and critical care doctor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore. Surgery, injections and scans for back pain “have all gone up pretty dramatically,” he told Reuters Health. Given that 1 in 10 of all primary care visits are for lower back pain, these findings are significant.

The American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society recommend that people with low back pain consider treatment with Tylenol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), as well as heating pads and exercise.

The groups say doctors should only order CT and other scans when they suspect nerve damage. Opioids are only recommended for patients with “severe, disabling pain” that doesn’t get better with over-the-counter medicines - and their risks, such as for abuse and addiction, should be weighed against potential benefits.

Dr. Bruce Landon from the Harvard Medical School in Boston and his colleagues tracked nationally-representative data on outpatient visits for back and neck pain collected between 1999 and 2010. The researchers had information on about 24,000 visits, which represented a total of 440 million appointments across the U.S.

During that span, they found the proportion of patients prescribed over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol and NSAIDs dropped from 37 percent to 25 percent. At the same time, the proportion given narcotics like OxiContin rose from 19 percent to 29 percent. Other studies have found that opioids help only slightly with acute back pain and are worthless for treating chronic back pain.

About 11 percent of people with back pain had a CT or MRI scan in 2009 and 2010, compared to seven percent in 1999 and 2000. While the scans are not harmful, they are very costly and in most cases, they don’t find anything wrong.

Finally, although the rate of referrals to physical therapy held steady during the study period, the proportion of patients referred to another doctor - likely for surgery or other treatments - doubled from seven to 14 percent, the researchers reported in JAMA Internal Medicine.

“Physicians want to offer patients treatments that are going to work sooner and patients are demanding them and sometimes it’s just easier to order the MRI or order the referral,” Landon said. But, he added, “They often lead to things that are unnecessary and expensive and maybe not better in the long run and maybe even worse,” such as surgery or injections that haven’t proven to be effective.

According to the National Institutes of Health, eight out of ten people have back pain at some point in their lives.

A journal commentary accompanying the study says that doctors should be given a little slack, because guidelines have been conflicted on back pain treatment until recently, and it takes 17 years, on average, for new treatment standards to be widely adopted. It suggests that creating checklist-type guidelines for doctors would help speed that process, as well as requiring patients to pay more of the cost of expensive imaging.

One of the difficulties of treating back pain, Cohen said, is that there are so many possible causes - including disc, joint and nerve problems. He said the strongest evidence supports treating the pain with exercise, including stretching and some aerobic activity.



Fight Pain Naturally with these Five Foods

More than 116 million Americans suffer from chronic pain. Many of those turn to prescription medications that can be addictive and sometimes come with unpleasant side effects. More often than not, the medications are merely masking the pain, rather than eliminating the true cause of pain. There is an alternative to living in pain and you'll be surprised to know it's right in your kitchen. Certain foods can ease aches and pain by combatting inflammation and blocking those pain signals. Here are our five favorites:

1. Cherries - Compounds in cherries called anthocyanins—the same phytonutrients that give cherries their rich red color—are powerful antioxidants that work in two ways to reduce pain. They block inflammation and they inhibit pain enzymes, just like aspirin, naproxen, and other non-steroid anti-inflammatories. According to a study in the *Journal of Nutrition*, people who ate a bowl of cherries for breakfast reduced a major marker of inflammation by 25%.

2. Ginger - While it's better known as an upset stomach soother, ginger also simulates aspirin as an anti-inflammatory. It can offer relief from migraines, arthritis pain and even muscle aches.

3. Fish High in Omega-3's - Eating fish that are high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury, such as salmon, herring and sardines, can help relieve back pain. In a healthy back, blood vessels at the edge of spinal disks transport crucial nutrients to those disks. If blood flow is diminished, the disks lose their source of oxygen and other nutrients, and they begin to degenerate. Omega-3s help by improving blood flow and reducing inflammation in blood vessels and nerves. One study in the journal *Surgical Neurology* found that taking supplemental omega 3's could reduce both back and neck pain.

4. Coffee – The caffeine in coffee can help reduce pain by narrowing the dilated blood vessels that develop with headaches. Coffee delivers a one-two punch by reducing pain-promoting compounds and amplifying the effect of other pain relievers too. (Fair warning: If you're already a coffee lover, too much caffeine can have the opposite effect. When you quit, you can get withdrawal headaches. Coffee works as a headache reliever only if you don't consume it regularly.)

5. Mint – Another remedy for headaches is peppermint. The menthol oil in peppermint is useful for relieving headaches. Rub some on your temples or wrists and breathe in the minty scent. You can also try brewing mint tea for any type of pain. Pour boiling water over peppermint leaves and steep until the tea is as strong as you like. Add wintergreen leaves for an extra pain-fighting boost; a compound in wintergreen called methyl salicylate blocks the enzymes that cause inflammation and pain.



Four Surprising Facts About Pain

If you're one of the 100 million Americans suffering from chronic pain, you know how debilitating it can feel. But did you know...

1. Pain is Still a Mystery - The American Academy of Pain Medicine defines pain as "an unpleasant sensation and emotional response to that sensation." Scientifically speaking, pain is felt when electrical signals are sent from nerve endings to your brain, which in turn can release painkillers called endorphins and generate reactions that range from instant and physical to long-term and emotional. Some pain is the result of an obvious injury. Other times, pain results from damaged nerves that are harder to define. Pain is a complex mixture of emotions, culture, experience, spirit and sensation that scientists are still struggling to fully understand.

2. Pain Might Shrink Your Brain - Pain can prevent a person from completing routine activities and cause incredible irritability that may seem irrational to most. But that's not all. The brains of people with chronic backaches are as much as 11 percent smaller than those of non-sufferers, scientists reported in 2004. Researchers still aren't sure why. They speculate that the neurons become overactive or tired and the stress of living with pain is just too much.

3. Women Feel More Pain - A man who has witnessed natural childbirth might think that women can tolerate just about anything. In fact, women have more nerve receptors than men, so it actually hurts more. For example, women have 34 nerve fibers per square centimeter of facial skin, whereas men average just 17. In a 2005 study, women were found to report more pain throughout their lifetimes and, compared with men, they feel pain in more areas of the body and for longer durations.

4. Animals Offer Insight - Animal research could offer clues to eventually further understand and even relieve human pain. A 2008 study revealed that the naked mole rat (a hairless, nearly blind subterranean creature) feels neither the pain of acid nor the sting of chili peppers. If researchers can determine why, it could lead to new painkilling therapies in humans. In 2006, scientists found a pathway for the transmission of chronic pain in rats that they hope will translate into better understanding of human chronic pain.





Arctic Air and Your Arthritis

Winter can be wonderful: beautiful snowfall, sipping hot chocolate and snuggling up by a cozy fire. But stiff and sore joints can be a definite downside to the cooler months; plenty of people suffering from arthritis and osteoarthritis find that cold weather makes their condition worse.

Barometric Pressure

One aspect of cool weather that could affect joints is barometric pressure – the force exerted by the weight of the atmosphere. Researchers suggest that a drop in barometric pressure, which tends to accompany cooler, damper weather, could allow tissues in joints to swell and put pressure on nerves that control pain signals.

Nerves

There is also evidence to suggest that bodily changes triggered by cooler weather have the side effect of amplifying pain signals from joints.

Many arthritis sufferers have pain that persists, despite having joints that are not extensively damaged. One proven reason for this is that their nervous system is essentially “misbehaving”; pain signals travelling along nerves from their joint are amplified in the brain by signals carried on separate nerves called sympathetic nerves.

Mood and Motion

A winter drop in mood is common for many people and low mood has been linked to higher levels of perceived pain.

Shorter days and cool temperatures can also make us less inclined to be active, and immobility can make arthritis pain worse by reducing the flow of nutrients and oxygen to joints. Finding a way to stay active in winter can make a huge difference. And getting active can also help improve your mood.



Pain is Prohibiting Sleep

A 2015 poll by the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) found that pain is a significant factor in the gap between the amount of sleep Americans say they need and the amount they're actually getting. The numbers are startling with an average 42-minute sleep debt for those with chronic pain and 14 minutes for those who've suffered from acute pain in the past week.

Those without pain have no overall sleep debt, but many in this group still have sleep issues. According to the poll, about one in three of those with no pain don't get the sleep they need to feel their best or have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. However, those numbers are much higher for those who suffer from chronic or acute pain.

The Poll found that pain joins two related concerns – stress and poor health – as key correlates of poor sleep quality and shorter sleep durations. But there are ways to fix the problem. The sleep gap narrows sharply among people who make sleep a priority by setting a routine bedtime and creating a supportive sleep environment – even among those with pain. Sleep is a marker of good health and having good sleep habits are crucial for improving the quality of life for those living with chronic and acute pain.

The national, random-sample survey established the broad impacts of pain-related sleep loss on millions of Americans. The study found that 21 percent of Americans experience chronic pain and 36 percent have had acute pain in the past week. If you combine those numbers, we're talking about more than half of the US adult population suffering from pain.

Sixty-five percent of those with no pain reported good to very good sleep quality, while only 46 percent of those with acute pain and 36 percent of those with chronic pain reported the same. Additionally, 23 percent of those with chronic pain reported higher stress levels, compared with 7 percent of those without pain.

Those with acute or chronic pain are more likely to have sleep problems impact their daily lives. Among people who've had sleep difficulties in the past week, more than four in 10 of those with chronic pain say those difficulties interfered with their work. That drops to 17 percent of those without pain. People with pain are also far more likely than others to report that lack of sleep interferes with their mood, activities, relationships and enjoyment of overall life.

People with pain also feel less control over their sleep, worry more about lack of sleep affecting their health and exhibit greater sleep sensitivity. They're more likely than others to say environmental factors make it more difficult for them to get a good night's sleep. These factors include noise, light, temperature and even their mattresses, suggesting that bedroom environment may be of particular importance to those suffering from pain.

While both chronic and acute pain relate to lost sleep, the survey indicates that chronic pain is an especially powerful problem. Clinicians and those that suffer from chronic pain know that pain and sleep problems usually go together and aggravate each other. This latest poll confirms the relationship between pain and sleep. Fortunately, it also shows that simple steps to improving sleep can make a big difference.





The Pain Fighting Power of Glucosamine and Omega 3s

If you or someone you love is consumed with pain associated with osteoarthritis, there is hope. The latest research suggests that glucosamine alone isn't enough. But glucosamine paired with powerful omega 3 fatty acids might just be a winning combination.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), osteoarthritis (OA) is a disease characterized by degeneration of cartilage and its underlying bone within a joint as well as bony overgrowth. The breakdown of these tissues eventually leads to pain and joint stiffness, with the joints most commonly affected being the knees, hips, and those in the hands and spine. There is currently no cure for OA. Treatment for OA focuses on relieving symptoms and improving function, and can include a combination of patient education, physical therapy, weight control, and use of medications. It is the most common type of arthritis in the United States, with an estimated 30 million people affected by the condition.

Traditionally, people have turned to the supplement glucosamine to help protect their joints or to manage osteoarthritis symptoms, but a new study from Germany suggests that a combination of glucosamine and omega 3 fatty acids may be an even better option.

Scientists recruited 177 people with moderate-to-severe hip or knee osteoarthritis and randomly assigned them to receive either a glucosamine supplement (1,500 milligrams per day) or glucosamine plus omega 3 fatty acids (providing 444mg of fish oil, of which 200mg were omega 3 fatty acids). After 26 weeks of supplementation, the researchers tested pain levels, using an established pain-scoring index (WOMAC).

The results showed that while the same number of people experienced at least a 20% reduction in pain in each group, 27% more people in the group taking glucosamine and omega 3s together experienced an 80% reduction in pain. In addition, the combination of the two reduced morning stiffness and pain in the hips and knees by between 48.5 and 55.6%, compared to 41.7 to 55.3% in the glucosamine-only group.

Commenting on their results, researchers suggest that glucosamine and omega 3s acted synergistically. "Omega 3 fatty acids inhibit the inflammation process in osteoarthritis, whereas glucosamine supports the rebuilding of lost cartilage substance," they stated. Dr. Newton's Naturals brings you this winning combination with their Glucosamine Cream and Omega Krill. Glucosamine Cream is transdermal, so it's fast acting and you can apply it directly where it hurts most. Omega Krill contains the most potent form of Omega 3s from the purest, most unpolluted waters. Don't let your osteoarthritis win; fight back with Dr. Newton's Naturals as your ally.





What Pain Sufferers Aren't Telling Their Doctors

Chronic pain affects approximately 100 million Americans each year and costs nearly \$600 billion, according to a report from the Institute of Medicine. A study by Kaiser Permanente has found that many chronic pain patients often don't tell their doctors when they seek alternative treatments.

The study, published recently in the *American Journal of Managed Care*, found that more than half of chronic pain patients in a managed care setting reported using alternative therapies, but many didn't discuss this care with their primary care providers. Researchers surveyed more than 6,000 Kaiser Permanente patients in Oregon and Washington who had three or more outpatient visits for chronic pain within 18 months. They found that 58% of these patients had used a chiropractor, acupuncture or both.

The majority shared information about these alternative therapies with their primary care provider, however 35% of those who had acupuncture only and 42% of those who had chiropractic care only didn't talk to their providers about this care. Interestingly, almost all of these patients said they would have been willing to share the information had their provider asked them.

"Our study confirms that most of our patients with chronic pain are seeking complementary treatments to supplement the care we provide in the primary care setting," said Charles Elder, MD, MPH, lead author of the study and affiliate investigator at the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research. "The problem is that too often, doctors don't ask about this treatment, and patients don't volunteer the information. We want our patients to get better, so we need to ask them about the alternative and complementary approaches they are using. If we know what's working and what's not working, we can do a better job advising patients, and we may be able to recommend an approach they haven't tried."

Elder went on to admit that from a public health standpoint, our management of chronic pain is woefully inadequate. And a breakdown in communication between patient and physician can only make matters worse. "Managing pain is complex," Elder said. It can involve a variety of different approaches, such as behavior changes, medications, therapies and procedures. When treating pain, doctors need to be aware of what approaches a person is and isn't using, what methods may be working and which practitioners that individual is seeing. Doctors need to know the big picture so that we can offer patients the full spectrum of care in a coordinated way."



Why Rheumatoid Arthritis Patients Need Vitamin D

Everyone needs the sunshine vitamin. It helps your bones grow properly and stay strong. Vitamin D also helps your body absorb calcium. But it may be even more important for people with Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) to get enough vitamin D. Recent research has found that some RA medications can cause deficiencies in patients.

A study at Albert Einstein College of Medicine found that those who take oral steroids for Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) have a heightened risk for vitamin D deficiency. In fact, those who take corticosteroids are two times more likely to be short on this crucial vitamin. Without enough vitamin D, your bones can become soft and brittle.

Researchers at the Johns Hopkins Division of Rheumatology have been looking at the effect of vitamin D on RA and osteoarthritis and the data suggests vitamin D is definitely a promising area for arthritis research.

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin that's essential for human health, yet most Americans -- up to 60 percent by some estimates -- are deficient in vitamin D. In part, that's because we spend less time outdoors and absorb less vitamin D from sunlight. However, it may also be due to the changing American diet. There are only a few foods with significant amounts of vitamin D and many of them are dairy products. With the advent of fat content awareness, people are shying away from dairy.

It has long been recognized that vitamin D is essential to bone health because it promotes calcium absorption. You may not know that vitamin D regulates as many as 1,000 different genes, including those that weed out precancerous cells and slow the reproduction of cancer cells. Vitamin D also helps maintain a healthy immune system and activates cells that fight infection, including the bacterium that causes tuberculosis.

During the past decade, there's been an explosion of research suggesting that vitamin D plays a significant role in joint health and that low levels may be a risk factor for conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

Unlike other vitamins, vitamin D is not just a simple nutrient -- it's an active steroid hormone that binds to receptors in vulnerable tissues, such as the joints affected most by arthritis and works to keep those tissues healthy. Research suggests that arthritis patients are at more risk than the general population of having low levels of vitamin D.

Another study presented at the European Union League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) meeting in Paris, found that nearly 75 percent of patients who presented at a rheumatology clinic -- including those who were subsequently diagnosed with inflammatory joint diseases, soft-tissue rheumatism, uncomplicated musculoskeletal backache or osteoporosis -- were deficient in vitamin D.

If you have RA, get your vitamin D levels checked often. This is especially important if you take oral steroids for your condition. To increase the amount of vitamin D in your diet, the Arthritis Foundation recommends getting 10 to 15 minutes of sunlight daily. This can help your body produce vitamin D naturally. Also look for foods that either naturally contain vitamin D, like salmon or are fortified with vitamin D, such as milk and cheese.



Five Ways to Help Ease Muscle Pain

According to a new study published in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research, light activity after a workout can help ease muscle soreness just as well as a massage.

Danish researchers asked 20 women to perform shoulder exercises. Two days later, the women received a 10-minute massage on one shoulder and performed 10 minutes of exercise (a lighter intensity version of the original moves) on the other. Participants felt equal amounts of relief in both shoulders.

Researchers suggest that light exercise increases circulation to muscles and may help speed up the body's drainage of metabolic waste linked to muscle aches. Previous research found that increased blood flow speeds delivery of nutrients to damaged muscles, makes tissues more elastic, and increases range of motion—all of which can help ease pain and boost recovery.

Moving your muscles isn't the only way to keep them pain-free. Try these five ways to help ease muscle pain:

1. Foam rollers - Similar to massage, foam rollers increase blood flow to your muscles through applied pressure. You decide which muscles you work, so you can make sure to focus on the areas that need the most attention.

2. Acetaminophen - Skip ibuprofen and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. You might feel better, but they also halt your body's production of a group of lipid compounds called prostaglandins, which research shows help muscles heal. Acetaminophen (aka Tylenol) can help temporarily ease pain without preventing muscles from repairing themselves.

3. Stretching—after a warm-up – You know the importance of stretching, but when you stretch is just as important. Limbering up relaxes and lengthens tight muscles, but stretching “cold” muscles can cause injury, so be sure to stretch after you've completed a light warm-up.

4. Heat therapy - Warm temperatures are helpful for increasing blood flow to sore muscles. Soak in a hot bath, or if the pain is isolated, apply heat directly to the spot that's causing you the most pain.

5. Omega-3s – the healthy fats in omega-3 fatty acids can help reduce soreness and ease inflammation 48 hours after a strength-training workout, according to research published in the Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine. Omega-3s are naturally found in foods such as salmon, spinach, and nuts—and may help boost circulation as well.

Top Ten Foods to Alleviate Sore Muscles

Sometimes, it's nice to feel a little sore after a good workout. It feels like you've accomplished your goals and you have something to show for it. But sometimes, you're so sore that you can barely get through the day, let alone do another workout. After exercising, try eating these foods to help alleviate sore muscles. You'll be much more likely to stick to your exercise routine if you're not in pain.

1. Blueberries, Cherries and Dark Fruits – studies have found that eating these dark fruits can help reduce delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) and recuperate strength faster. Plus, tart cherries have the added benefit of melatonin so your body can get better rest post-workout.

2. Leafy Greens and Cruciferous Vegetables – you know they're full of nutrients, but they also help improve the metabolic process, reduce inflammation and fight free radicals that can slow the recovery process. Research also suggests that leafy greens can lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, after training.

3. High Glycemic Fruits and Starches – you need to replenish glycogen fast after a good workout. In exercise and metabolic studies, watermelon was found to increase nitric oxide production, delivering nutrient-rich blood to damaged muscle tissue. With just about every nutrient we need, potatoes are an excellent choice as well.

4. Water – sounds too simple, right? But if you're not hydrated, your body will have a difficult time recovering from hard exercise, especially during warmer weather. Don't just drink before and after your workout – sip water throughout the day for maximum benefits.

5. Cod and Salmon – fish is full of the healthy omega-3 fatty acids, DHA and EPA. They are among the best for recovery since they have anti-inflammatory effects. Omega-3's have also been shown to reduce muscle soreness.

6. Almonds and Nuts – nuts can help accelerate repair of damaged tissue. Almonds are an excellent source of omega-6 fatty acids that have performed very well in aiding recuperation after intense exercise. Brazil nuts are another powerhouse choice since they contain a trifecta of the minerals selenium, magnesium and zinc, which are essential for hormone balance and recovery.



7. Fermented Foods – if your gut isn't functioning properly, your body will take longer to recover following exercise. A diet rich in fiber and probiotics can help ensure full absorption of nutrients needed for tissue repair as well as eliminate oxidative stress and reduce inflammation.

8. Eggs – they are a perfect protein source with the second highest concentration of leucine after milk. Leucine is the most important amino acid for building muscle. Research suggests that eating eggs can enhance energy production and reduce inflammation as well.

9. Cinnamon – a study of women martial arts athletes found that taking 3 grams of cinnamon powder with food helped significantly reduce delayed onset muscle soreness.

10. Turmeric and Ginger – turmeric and ginger have powerful anti-inflammatory properties. Cooking with these spices can improve recovery after an intense workout.

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Are you or someone
you love suffering
from chronic pain?
We know how debilitating
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source.

