Osteoarthritis, Dairy, and You

by KARLA JARVIS

Is Dairy Bad for Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a relatively common degenerative joint disease which results in the loss of cartilage within the joints. It is this cartilage that allows our joints to move smoothly and pain-free. In osteoarthritis (the most common type of arthritis), this articular cartilage wears down, leading to a loss of function in the affected joint. When the cushioning cartilage is absent, bone meets bone in a painful manner. I know this pain first-hand, with every step I take, due to the osteoarthritis in my feet. To help symptoms, doctors may recommend consuming calcium, which is found in dairy. But is dairy bad for osteoarthritis? We will answer this.

What Does Osteoarthritis Feel Like?

Bone spurs may develop, and bits of bone and cartilage may break away and remain within the joint, causing pain and further damage to the joint. While the cause of osteoarthritis remains a mystery, treatment options are better than ever. Treating the symptoms of osteoarthritis aims to reduce pain and improve the function and mobility of the affected joint.

Many individuals with osteoarthritis, including myself, experience painful stiffness, a significant decrease in the joint's range of motion, and discomfort, ranging from a mild, dull ache to throbbing pain. Others who suffer from osteoarthritis find that they experience these symptoms, as well as joint swelling. The disease is also commonly present in the hips, hands, knees, and spine.

What Are the Risk Factors?

You may be at an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis if you are female and the disease is common in your family, as genetics play a role. Other risk factors include obesity, aging, and repetitive joint injury or overuse. Unfortunately, there is not yet a cure for osteoarthritis, so you and your health care team will choose treatments to manage your symptoms.

Living with the effects of osteoarthritis will require your best efforts; by increasing your physical activity, maintaining a healthy body composition, and adhering to physical therapies, you can go a long way in managing your osteoarthritis. Eating healthy and following a nutrient-rich diet is also essential. Dairy is one source of many essential nutrients and remains one of the primary food groups.

What the Science Tells Us About Dairy and Osteoarthritis

How consuming options from the dairy food group may or may not impact your osteoarthritis symptoms is an area at the attention of many researchers. However, the results are still pending; experts are not yet able to say definitively if dairy is, or is not, a sound choice concerning your osteoarthritis.

Many individuals are now choosing a dairy-free diet for a variety of reasons. How does dairy or the lack of dairy in

our diets impact our risk of osteoarthritis and the painful and limiting symptoms that go along with this disease? Simply put, research has not yet determined which parts of dairy foods may be the most beneficial or the least when it comes to osteoarthritis. Dairy is a large food group that includes a massive variety of cheeses, yogurts, and milk. This wide variety is why researchers cannot yet definitively say how dairy may or may not impact osteoarthritis symptoms.

Dairy remains an essential source of nutrients such as vitamin D, calcium, vitamins A and B12, and phosphorus. Dairy has benefits for bone health as it is rich in calcium and vitamin D. It is possible to consume adequate amounts of all essential vitamins and minerals from foods and supplements not found in dairy products. Remember, osteoarthritis is a disease of the cartilage and not of the bone.

Dairy, Your Diet, and Osteoarthritis

The Arthritis Foundation does not include dairy consumption in its list of treatment options, nor does the Arthritis Society. The Centers for Disease Control echoes these organizations in their osteoarthritis treatment options of being active, maintaining a healthy weight, and protecting the joints. The CDC also does not make recommendations on dairy intake as a way to prevent or treat osteoarthritis. However, this does not mean that dairy is a poor or “wrong” food choice.

While many people feel that supplementing their diet eases their osteoarthritis symptoms, there has not yet been conclusive evidence that dietary supplements help with osteoarthritis symptoms. This lack of inclusion does not mean that consuming dairy is necessarily wrong. The science behind these studies is challenging because of the dietary variety of dairy products across the globe.

In particular, cheeses vary broadly in ingredients, fat content, and other factors from region to region, impacting the results of any research studies. One research study found that an increase in low fat and skim milk resulted in a “slower progression of knee osteoarthritis” for women but not for men. Another large study found that “those who ate more dairy products were more likely to need hip replacement surgery.” Yet another research study found no evidence that avoiding dairy provided any benefits to those with arthritis.

Managing OA With Foods

The Arthritis Foundation has created a helpful “Ultimate Arthritis Diet” designed to reduce inflammation and improve arthritis symptoms. The diet includes various fishes, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, olive oils, and beans but does not include any foods from the dairy group. However, its exclusion from this diet does not necessarily make dairy “bad” for your health. Again, dairy contains many healthy nutrients and comes in so many delicious choices!

Calcium and vitamin D, both found in abundance in dairy products, are critical for bone health. Calcium can also be found in abundance in salmon, beans, sardines, and many calcium-fortified foods. Vitamin D can be found in non-dairy sources such as the sun, supplements, and supplemented foods. You and your health care may want to explore going dairy-free to determine if it has any impact on your osteoarthritis symptoms.

Talk to Your Doctor and Make a Choice

Choosing to include dairy in your diet or avoid it altogether will come down to a few factors. The first is your personal preference. It’s important to consider why you want to include dairy in your diet; if it is simply because of the nutrients, they can be found in many other foods. Next, have a conversation with your health care team about the benefits and drawbacks of including dairy in your diet; considering dairy consumption along with your entire health will best guide your decision.

While dairy products have many benefits, they may not be suitable for everyone. A discussion with your doctor about your overall health and any other health conditions you may have will best inform your decision to include dairy in your diet or go dairy-free.