

Natural Treatment of Rheumatoid Arthritis

by Gene Bruno, B.S., M.H.S., R.H.(AHG) and Art Presser, Pharm.D., D.H.Ph.

In the natural products industry, glucosamine and chondroitin are probably the most popular dietary supplements for the treatment of osteoarthritis. There is no data indicating these dietary supplements will be of benefit in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (RA); however, other nutritional ingredients can be effective in the treatment of this condition.

The American College of Rheumatology reports RA is a chronic disease affecting more than 2 million Americans, causing pain, stiffness, swelling and loss of function in the joints and inflammation in other body organs. Unlike OA, RA is an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system attacks its own joint tissue. While the cause of RA remains unknown, recent studies suggest genetic predisposition plays a key role. However, it appears supplementation with certain natural ingredients may help the situation—often significantly.

Undenatured Collagen Type II

UC-II™ is a proprietary brand of undenatured type II collagen (from InterHealth Nutraceuticals) derived from chicken sternum cartilage and is particularly valuable for RA sufferers. Type II collagen administered orally works with the immune system to promote healthy joints by a process called oral tolerization. This process helps the body to differentiate between foreign invaders, such as bacteria, and elements that are good for the body, such as nutrients. The process of oral tolerization takes place in the small intestine where food is absorbed. Through a complex series of immunological events, patches of lymphoid tissue surrounding the small intestine screen incoming compounds and serve as a on-off “switch” for the body's immune response to foreign substances, depending upon what that substance is. In the case of UC-II, small amounts (typically 10 mg or less) taken orally at bedtime have been shown to turn off the immune response targeted at the type II collagen present in bone joint cartilage.^{1,2}

UC-II is supported by six human clinical studies, including research at Harvard University Medical School. Among the findings:

- In a 90-day, double blind, placebo-controlled, follow-up study on patients with severe RA, Harvard scientists found administration of undenatured Type II collagen to 28 RA patients significantly improved disease symptoms compared to the placebo group, while four patients recovered completely.³
- In another double blind, placebo-controlled trial, Harvard Medical School researchers showed that following treatment with undenatured type II collagen, 21 of 54 RA patients (39 percent) demonstrated significant improvement, while only 11 of 57 patients (19 percent) taking a placebo showed improvement.⁴
- Another Harvard study found after three months of treatment with undenatured type II collagen, eight out of 10 patients with juvenile RA had a reduction in both swollen and tender joints. Six patients had greater than a 33-percent reduction in both swelling and tender joint counts.⁵

Since UC-II is taken at bedtime, we also recommend the use of two herbs to be taken concurrently to promote healthy sleep and help reduce RA-associated pain.

The first, valerian root (*Valeriana officinalis*), has been used for over 1,000 years to relieve muscle spasms, as a mild sedative, treatment for insomnia, hysteria, nervous tension, fatigue and menstrual cramps. Research indicates a scientific basis for mild sedative qualities, spasmolytic activity and mild pain relief.⁶ It is also used orally for muscle and joint pain⁷, as well as to treat neuralgia.⁸

The other botanical is California poppy (*Eschscholtzia californica*), which was historically used to treat insomnia, aches and pains, nervous conditions, childhood enuresis and bladder disorders.⁹ Its sedating effects are potentially valuable for pain relief, since tension can exacerbate pain. This sedating effect was demonstrated in a double blind, placebo-controlled study where a preparation containing fixed quantities of hawthorn, California poppy and magnesium proved safe and more effective than placebo in treating mild-to-moderate anxiety disorders.¹⁰ In another study, extracts of corydalis and California poppy inhibited a degradation process affecting certain pain-modulating peptides in the brain, prolonging the activity of these molecules.¹¹

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Well-controlled clinical studies have clearly demonstrated consumption of omega-3 essential fatty acids (EFAs) benefits RA sufferers.¹² A comprehensive review of medical literature by a board-certified rheumatologist revealed treatment with omega-3 EFAs is associated with improvement in outcome measures in RA and is able to help decrease the long-term requirements for nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., aspirin, ibuprofen) in some circumstances.¹³ Furthermore, an expert workshop reviewing the health effects of omega-3s concluded these natural substances were able to help alleviate the symptoms of RA.¹⁴ It should be noted that these benefits were not limited to adult RA sufferers. A study conducted in the Czech Republic found children with chronic juvenile RA were able to decrease their ibuprofen consumption by 17.3 percent over a period of five months when treated with a diet rich in omega-3 EFAs.¹⁵ Effective dosage for RA is approximately 375 mg eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and 250 mg docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), with 625 mg of total omega-3 fatty acids, twice daily.

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