

Active Living with Arthritis Podcast #15

Fact or Fiction Part 2: Magnetic Bracelets, Glucosamine, Omega-3 Fatty Acids, Arthroscopic Surgery, and Ice vs. Heat

Karen: Welcome to another Active Living with Arthritis podcast, presented by the ENACT center at Boston University as part of our Interact with ENACT series. We're here to bring you evidence-based information related to arthritis and rehabilitation. Make sure to subscribe to our podcasts to receive episodes as they're produced. I'm Dr. Karen Jacobs, an Occupational Therapist, professor in occupational therapy at Boston University, and also your host for the second fact or fiction podcast. I'm here today with Amber Steckel and Kaitlin Thompson, candidates for the Doctor of Physical Therapy degree at Boston University.

Today is the second part of a two-episode pursuit for truth! Today, we will address questions about, glucosamine and omega-3 fatty acid supplements, magnetic bracelets, arthroscopic surgery, and the never-ending debate over ice versus heat.

It seems like the hot topic around arthritis these days is glucosamine supplements. Our first question is, does this supplement actually work or not? What did you find, Kaitlin?

Kaitlin: There is a lot of current research on the subject, and I was as eager as you to find answers about glucosamine. Most studies found only small effects of glucosamine on osteoarthritis symptoms, if at all. Results from these studies leaned towards improvements in pain, function, and increasing the joint space. However, there haven't been any conclusive studies finding that glucosamine works. More research is needed before we can say whether or not these claims are true.

Karen: That sounds promising. Where can I get my hands on this stuff, Amber?

Amber: Not so fast, Karen. This is only preliminary research, and more is needed to truly prove it's effects for osteoarthritis patients. However, studies show that glucosamine is just as safe as placebo for most people.

People with diabetes should be cautious when considering trying glucosamine because it may affect insulin levels. If you want to try glucosamine, be sure to consult with your doctor to make sure that it is safe for you. If it is safe, and you can afford it, try it for a couple months. If it works for you great, if it doesn't, no harm done. If you are already taking glucosamine and feel that it is working for you, it appears that you can continue taking it without any harm. In the US, glucosamine is available over-the-counter at most drug stores. It is relatively the same cost as other nutritional supplements. At this time, we can't recommend for or against the use of glucosamine, and we are unsure of the true effects for osteoarthritis patients. Be sure to discuss the use of supplements with your doctor before trying glucosamine though.

Karen: You mentioned that glucosamine is a supplement. We touched on omega-3 fatty acids, another nutritional supplement, in a previous ENACT podcast episode with Dr. Kristin Baker. She explained that this essential nutrient plays an important role in inflammation, the process associated with arthritis, which brings us to our second question. People say that omega-3 fatty acids can help with inflammation, and reduce arthritis symptoms. What can you tell us about that, Kaitlin?

Kaitlin: Well, let's start with inflammation. Inflammation is the process associated with all types of arthritis. It can make joints swollen, red and painful. In rheumatoid arthritis, inflammation occurs all over the body, affecting many different joints and tissues. In osteoarthritis, inflammation takes place in the affected joint, and leads to joint breakdown. There have been many studies on the effects of omega-3 fatty acids in rheumatoid arthritis. They report decreased inflammation and improved pain and function. However, only animal and cell studies have been done for osteoarthritis, so there is still a great need for human studies. These studies, however, suggest that omega-3 fatty acids may also decrease the localized inflammation in osteoarthritis.

Karen: That is so interesting. Now, Amber, how can someone get omega-3 fatty acids into their diet?

Amber: Fatty fish, like salmon and sardines, as well as flaxseed and walnuts, are great sources of omega-3 fatty acids. It can also be taken as a nutritional supplement. As with glucosamine, though, we encourage people to talk with a nutritionist and/or a doctor about the amount you should take to reduce joint pain.

Karen: That's really important to remember. Your doctor should always be aware of what medications and nutritional supplements you're taking. Our third question today is whether the magnetic or copper bracelet will help arthritis symptoms. Amber, is this true?

Amber: Unfortunately, no. Studies show that wearing a copper or magnetic bracelet, even for up to 4 months, has no effect on pain, stiffness, or function. I wish there was such an easy fix out there. There were no side effects from wearing the bracelets though, so they can still make a great accessory.

Karen: My favorite part of any outfit! Now, speaking of a quick fix, you've brought us to our fourth myth. I've heard that getting arthroscopic surgery can take away all the scar tissues built up from arthritis, and make the joint healthy again. What did you find in regards to that, Kaitlin?

Kaitlin: Well, as Amber said, there is no quick fix for arthritis. We looked at arthroscopic debridement and lavage. Arthroscopic debridement is the removal of debris and scar tissue within the joint, and arthroscopic lavage is simply rinsing out the inside of the joint. Neither of these procedures benefit the arthritic joint at all. Actually, most people felt more pain after the surgery and compared to those who did not have surgery, those who did get arthroscopic surgery had no difference in pain or function over time. In any case, you should always exhaust all other options before considering surgery, like exercise, physical therapy, and usual medical care.

Karen: That's really good advice. I'm always hearing different things about ice and heat, which brings us to our fifth and final question today. Which is better Amber--ice or heat?

Amber: Well, many people believe that heating the affected joint will loosen it up and make it feel better. This may be true just after heating superficially, like with a hot pack, but the effects seen are very small and they don't last long. Arthritis is a condition of joint inflammation and heat actually increases the inflammatory process, so it may not be appropriate for people with arthritis. On the other hand, ice has the opposite effect, decreasing the inflammatory process. Ice reduces swelling and improves muscle function around an inflamed joint. For these reasons, ice may be helpful during a flare-up, especially if joint swelling is present. However, the effects seen with ice are also small, as with heat. In general, we would recommend for you to use whatever feels good to you, but to avoid heat during flare-ups.

Karen: That's so good to know. And I think that wraps up our final fact or fiction installment! In summary, today we found that magnetic bracelets and arthroscopic surgery don't do much for arthritis. Ice wins the debate over heat. Glucosamine and omega-3 fatty acids have potential to improve pain and function for osteoarthritis patients, but we can't say anything for sure whether these supplements works or not just yet.

We hope you enjoyed this podcast, thanks for listening! If you'd like to offer feedback, ask questions, or let us know of topics that you're interested in, please send an email to enact (e-n-a-c-t) @ bu.edu. On our website- www.bu.edu/enact we have a copy of today's show notes, information about the center, and a list of online resources. Make sure to subscribe to our podcast to receive new episodes of Active Living with Arthritis as they're produced. Until our next podcast, stay active!