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Eating Turmeric May Help Knee Arthritis: What to Know About Food vs. Supplements



Written by [George Citroner](#) on September 17, 2020 — [Fact checked](#) by Jennifer Chesak



Turmeric is often used in Ayurvedic medicine, a traditional medicine practice based in India. Getty Images

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- **Over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription pain medication can offer relief for knee pain, but are frequently associated with side effects.**
- **Recent studies have found turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), a spice that's often used in South Asian foods like curries, may help with joint pain.**
- **But is it better to take it as a supplement or in food?**

Arthritis is the most common joint disorder in the United States, and knees are often the first joints affected by the condition.

One study found that in people above age 60, more than 10 percent of men and 13 percent of women had symptoms of arthritis in their [knees](#) ✓.

OTC and prescription pain medication can offer relief, but are frequently associated with [side effects](#). These side effects include kidney damage and heart problems.

Almost 20 percent of Americans report some degree of knee pain, according to [figures](#) published in 2006 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Pain can range from mild stiffness to levels that are nearly disabling.

Recent studies have found that turmeric, a flavorful spice popular in India, may help relieve joint pain. The spice is popular in Ayurvedic medicine, but is mainly used in food in the United States and not as a medication.

Experts say that there is increasingly clear evidence that the active ingredient in turmeric may have health benefits.

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“It is widely believed that curcumin, which is the active ingredient in turmeric, has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. And for this reason, it’s frequently used as a supplement by many people to help with joint symptoms,” Dr. [Nagendra Gupta](#), FACP, CPE, an internist at Texas Health Arlington Memorial Hospital, told Healthline.

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As effective as an anti-inflammatory drug

A study [published](#)  in the medical journal *Trials* compared the effectiveness of turmeric to that of an anti-inflammatory drug called diclofenac.

The randomized trial gave 139 patients with knee pain either a 500-milligram (mg) capsule of curcumin three times a day or a 50-mg diclofenac pill twice daily. Scientists found that both groups experienced significant pain relief.

“Curcumin has similar efficacy to diclofenac but demonstrated better

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side effects of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs,” the study authors wrote.

More effective than placebo

In another [study](#), published this week in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, researchers at the University of Australia in Tasmania assigned 70 participants, over age 40, with knee osteoarthritis (OA) and swelling diagnosed by ultrasound, to receive either 1000 mg per day of turmeric or a placebo.

After 12 weeks, the randomly controlled placebo trial found that an extract of turmeric was more effective than a placebo in reducing knee pain in people with knee osteoarthritis.

Those taking turmeric reported significantly less knee pain at the end of the study, according to the standardized questionnaire.

Researchers emphasized that more research is needed, and the only limiting factor of their study was the small number of participants.

This research also received funding from [Natural Remedies PVT Ltd](#), a company that offers Ayurvedic medicines and herbs.

While this may indicate a conflict of interest, previous research also supports this spice’s effectiveness for pain relief.

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Turmeric is effective and not toxic

Turmeric (*Curcuma Longa*) is a frequently used [spice](#) in South Asian foods like curries, and it can add a warm orange or yellow color to meats and rice dishes. It also has a long history of use in [Ayurvedic medicine](#).

The active ingredient in turmeric is curcumin, and [research](#) finds that it “has a surprisingly wide range of beneficial properties.”

Curcumin, unlike some NSAIDs, has also been determined to be nontoxic. NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen, taken in [excess](#) can cause symptoms that include convulsions, coma, and acute renal (kidney) failure.

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Experts say that given turmeric's known health benefits, including it in meals is best.

Eating turmeric with fats or oils can improve absorption.

"Turmeric however, specifically the phytonutrient curcumin, has so many health benefits, so definitely incorporating turmeric into meals would be ideal as part of an overall healthy lifestyle plan," said [Reema Kanda](#), RD, a clinical dietitian at [Hoag Orthopedic Institute](#).

"Incorporating turmeric into meals that contain fats and oils or black pepper will enhance absorption."

Kanda emphasized that the quality of the turmeric powder can also affect [bioavailability](#). She also said, "You want to be sure the turmeric powder is free of contaminants that are often found when making powders."

She added that many studies have utilized turmeric extracts over turmeric powder, which has higher amounts of curcumin. Because of that, "the studies recommended extracts for therapeutic use for health benefits such as improving in joint pain."

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Changing your diet may also help relieve knee pain

There's strong [evidence](#) that eating the Mediterranean diet may provide significant knee pain relief in people with OA.

Researchers reviewing three different studies found that people with symptoms of arthritis had an improved quality of life after starting the Mediterranean diet.

According to the study, the Mediterranean diet may benefit OA because of its anti-inflammatory properties, tendency to reverse [metabolic syndrome](#) (a risk factor of diabetes), and reduce obesity.

Researchers say the diet is also rich in [polyphenols](#) (plant compounds), which can prevent inflammation and cartilage destruction, and this could also be why it shows benefit.

“While there is no specific diet that works as a cure for arthritis, various studies have shown that a Mediterranean diet can help fight the inflammation associated with arthritis and slow the disease progression,” said Gupta.

Turmeric considered safe, but the dose matters

As always, getting the right dosage is key to staying healthy. While turmeric may help joint pain, more is not always better.

Consuming large amounts of turmeric can have side effects.

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Subjects in a 2006 small dose-response [study](#) reported a range of adverse reactions from using 500 mg to 12,000 mg of curcumin daily, although the researchers found overall participants tolerated the high levels of the spice.

Of 24 participants, seven reported side effects that included headache, diarrhea, and skin rash. All but one of the people with side effects were taking over 4,000 mg of turmeric.

Turmeric is also high in oxalate, a chemical that in [large doses](#) can combine with calcium to create kidney stones.

According to the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#), curcumin, the active ingredient in turmeric, is “generally recognized as safe.” However, the FDA has previously [warned](#) that turmeric from Bangladesh contained excessive levels of lead, which can adversely affect health.

Studies have shown that turmeric can have strong [anticoagulant](#) effects, which could affect how blood-thinning drugs work in the body.

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The bottom line

If you want to try using turmeric to treat joint pain, it's always a good idea to speak with your doctor first to make sure it won't interact with medications you're already taking.

Joint pain, especially in the knee, due to arthritis affects about 1 in 10 older Americans.

Research finds that an ingredient in the spice turmeric can significantly reduce knee pain in people with osteoarthritis – but it won't improve swelling or change cartilage.

Although considered safe by the FDA, there is strong evidence that turmeric can interact with blood-thinning drugs, and the agency has warned that turmeric imported from Bangladesh has shown high levels of lead.

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