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Treating osteoarthritis of the knee

Popular supplements don't work

Many people with osteoarthritis have knee pain. They often try over-the-counter treatments to help the pain, and to avoid knee surgery. The supplements, glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate, are very popular. In 2012, Americans spent \$813 million on these supplements, according to the Nutrition Business Journal.

The knee pain is caused by the breakdown of the cartilage. This is the tough flexible tissue that covers the ends of the knee and other joints. Glucosamine and chondroitin are building blocks of cartilage. But they are not good for pain relief. Here's why:

These popular supplements don't work.

Many studies have shown that glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate do not help to relieve arthritic knees. People who take the supplements often report less pain or swelling of their joints. But people get similar results if they take a placebo—a “sugar pill” with no active ingredients. Pain relieving drugs, such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen, help a lot more.



The supplements can be dangerous.

Glucosamine and chondroitin are not harmful by themselves, but they can interact with other medicines. For example, the supplements can increase the effect of warfarin (Coumadin and generics) on blood clotting. This increases the risk of bruising and serious bleeding. Problems with warfarin cause a third of all emergency room visits among seniors in the U.S.

These supplements are a waste of money.

You will spend about \$130 a year if you take a glucosamine/chondroitin supplement every day.

To make matters worse, often the labels on the bottles are misleading. In 2013, Consumer Reports tested 16 joint pain supplements and found that seven had less chondroitin than the label listed.

Other approaches often work better.

There are more effective ways to relieve arthritic knee pain:

- Physical therapy
- Losing weight
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic)
- Ibuprofen (Advil and generic)
- Naproxen (Aleve and generic)

If these don't help, you can talk to your doctor about treatments such as injections or surgery.

Advice from Consumer Reports

Steps to help ease the pain of osteoarthritis of the knee

Lose excess weight.

Losing a pound of excess weight can take about four pounds of pressure off your knees when walking.

Physical activity. To build support of the knees, do strength training, especially of the quad muscles on the front of the thigh. Aerobic exercise builds strength and can reduce pain. Stretching can help prevent stiffness.

Ask a local "Y" or gym about exercise programs for people with arthritis.

Mechanical aids. A cane, crutch, or walker can take a load off painful knees. Your insurance usually covers them if they are medically necessary.

Heat and cold. A heating pad can ease ongoing stiffness and soreness in joints. For acute pain and swelling, switch to ice packs.

Massage. Deep-tissue massage got high marks in a 2010 survey of Consumer Reports online readers. Half of them said that it "helped a lot" with their osteoarthritis.

Use drugs carefully.

- Ibuprofen (Advil and generics) and naproxen (Aleve and generics) can ease pain and inflammation. But they may cause stomach bleeding and high blood pressure, if taken over a longer time. Try to use them only for short periods.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic) can also help reduce pain, but high doses can damage your liver. Make sure you take less than 3,000 mg a day.



This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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