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Arthritis pains

# Do home remedies work?



Some people with arthritis may find that gentle massages help improve joint mobility, but only in the short term. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

**Many seek short-term relief from chronic pain with massages, hot showers and cold compresses**



**Akshita Nanda**  
Correspondent

In late 2013, Madam Katherine Tan began experiencing unusual tiredness, joint pains and stiffness.

The managing director of a company in the tooling industry thought she was overworked, but the issues persisted despite her trying to rest. She even fell because of stiffness in her left leg.

She was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis in 2014 and started specialist treatment at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

The 64-year-old tells The Straits Times via e-mail that she has tried numerous ways to address her pain, to no avail. Over-the-counter medication, pain plasters and creams, and massages offer only short-lived relief at best.

"The pain is especially throbbing and aching first thing in the morning," she says.

Imagine having trouble buttoning a shirt, using cutlery or walking a few steps. That is the reality of many people with arthritis, who find that inflammation and pain in

the joints affect their ability to do everyday activities.

Many seek relief from the pain in over-the-counter painkillers and plasters, or home remedies such as massages or hot showers.

In parts of Europe, a traditional remedy is to wrap the affected joint in a cabbage leaf. A 2016 study by researchers from Germany and Australia found some anecdotal evidence to support the efficacy of the cabbage leaf wrap as a pain reliever. A 2022 study by Polish researchers suggests that cabbage leaves might have an anti-inflammatory effect.

Home remedies may be cheaper and seemingly gentler on the body – warm showers are certainly more soothing than popping strong over-the-counter painkillers.

However, are they really useful in managing pain from arthritis? Here is what doctors said.

**100 TYPES OF ARTHRITIS, HUNDREDS OF PAINS**

According to adjunct assistant professor Koh Li Wearn, who is a senior consultant at TTSH's Department of Rheumatology, Allergy, and Immunology, the term "arthritis" refers to diseases affecting the joint that typically result in pain and affect the function and movement of the joint.

"There are more than 100 different types of arthritis, and different types may affect people of different ages," says Dr Koh.

Dr Glenn Low, a general practitioner at DTAP Clinic @ Holland Village, says the body initiates an inflammatory response as a result of a trigger, or to get rid of harmful substances, and a person experiences pain, swelling and warmth as a result.

**For patients with hand osteoarthritis, the pain and stiffness may affect other routine actions such as using utensils to eat, opening doorknobs or performing household chores.**



**DR PHANG KEE FONG**, consultant with Alexandra Hospital's Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine

"In certain cases, the trigger that caused the inflammation continues to persist or the inflammatory process itself becomes dysfunctional, giving rise to various arthritic medical conditions," says Dr Low.

Common types of arthritis include gout, as a result of uric acid crystals deposited in the joints; rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the joints; or osteoarthritis, in which wear and tear cause changes in the joint.

"Osteoarthritis and gout are the two conditions most seen in primary care and general practice," says Dr Low.

By the time patients see a doctor, most are suffering enough pain to interfere with their quality of life, he adds.

While there are no recent statistics on how many suffer arthritis in

Singapore, studies in 2016 and 2018 indicate that 11 per cent of the population could have knee osteoarthritis.

Dr Phang Kee Fong, consultant with Alexandra Hospital's Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, says that pain due to osteoarthritis can severely limit patients' mobility and ability to climb stairs. "For patients with hand osteoarthritis, the pain and stiffness may affect other routine actions such as using utensils to eat, opening doorknobs or performing household chores."

Inflammatory arthritis, of which rheumatoid arthritis is a type, affects about 1 per cent of the population, he adds, including young people and the middle-aged. It can affect their ability to work as well.

Chronic pain is a major issue that the National Arthritis Foundation (NAF) tries to help with. The charity offers those with arthritis support, such as through peer support groups and subsidised home physiotherapy services.

Chronic pain has mental, physical and social consequences, says NAF executive director Gerald Koh. "Emotional and psychological challenges, such as anxiety and depression, can arise from dealing with a chronic illness, especially if one has significant physical limitations," he adds.

Pain relief and improving mobility are thus key parts of treating arthritic medical conditions.

**HOT WATER CAN HELP**

Dr Jerry Chen, consultant orthopaedic surgeon and medical director of Alps Orthopaedic Centre, says some of his patients find relief in soaking in a bath of Epsom salts, or magnesium sulphate.

"While some patients report temporary relief, it's unclear whether this is due to the magnesium or warm water and relaxation," he adds.

Dr Koh Li Wearn of TTSH says soaking in warm water is probably the relieving factor, rather than the Epsom salts. "The warmth is relaxing and the water supports most of the body weight, hence taking stress off the joints."

Hydrotherapy or rehabilitation activities carried out in water can help arthritis sufferers manage pain and improve mobility, says NAF's Gerald Koh. The charity hopes to train volunteers to conduct such sessions.

Hot showers might also help manage arthritic pain. Dr Kelvin Tan, an orthopaedic consultant surgeon at private practice Singapore Sports and Orthopaedic Clinic, says: "Heat, and therefore warm water, relieves pain by increasing the blood flow to the region and increases connective tissue elasticity."

People might also find relief through cold compresses. "A cold compress relieves swelling and pressure in the affected areas, and reduces muscle spasms and metabolic demands in the affected areas," adds Dr Tan.

Dr Andrew Fang, a family physician at private medical chain Doctor Anywhere, says: "The key is to use heat for stiffness and cold for inflammation."

"However, prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures could cause burns or frostbite, so it's essential to limit application times to 15 to 20 minutes."

CONTINUED on C2

Arthritis pains

# Treatment varies for each patient

FROM C1

GENTLE MESSAGES

Some people with arthritis find that massaging their joints gently can help improve mobility and provide some pain relief.

Dr Tan says that massages offer only short-term relief, and research has not established any long-term benefits. Any benefit probably comes from the stretching of the joints during the massage as well as releasing tension from the muscles surrounding the joint, plus any heat or warmth applied during the massage.

Dr Fang says massages can improve circulation and reduce muscle tension, helping patients relax.

"When combined with oils such as olive oil, which has anti-inflammatory properties, massages can offer some relief from pain and stiffness. Essential oils like lavender or eucalyptus may provide additional calming effects due to their soothing aromas," he adds.

Dr Fang warns that aggressive and deep tissue massage can worsen arthritis, and one should use gentle techniques and avoid massaging directly over severely inflamed joints. He suggests working with a therapist who knows how to manage arthritic conditions.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES VARY, SEEK TREATMENT EARLY

Home remedies may offer some relief, but the downside is that it may prevent patients from

seeking medical help in the early stages.

Dr Ang Kian Chuan, an orthopaedic surgeon at private practice SBF Sports and Hand Centre, says it is more important to seek medical help early, get the correct diagnosis and start treatment. Treatment options include rest, medication, physiotherapy and surgery.

Individual variation in response means that not every treatment works for every patient, he adds.

Dr Fang says: "Each patient is unique, and the best approach is often a combination of medical management, lifestyle changes and safe home remedies."

He notes that corticosteroid injections may help some patients manage pain. However, he had a 75-year-old patient who found that these injections kept the pain at bay for only a few months.

In the end, she had total knee replacement surgery for both knees. Post-surgery physiotherapy helped her regain function. "Today, she remains active, regularly going to the gym and taking daily walks," says Dr Fang.

Dr Chen says exercise is crucial in managing arthritis. He adds: "Low-impact activities like swimming, cycling and walking help maintain joint mobility and muscle strength, reducing pain and preventing further joint damage. Physiotherapy can also be invaluable, teaching patients specific exercises to strengthen the muscles around their joints, improve flexibility and manage pain."

He notes that studies have shown that yoga and taiji in particular may help arthritis sufferers. "These therapies can

help improve flexibility, reduce stress and manage pain," he says.

Dr Koh Li Wearn says that overweight patients with lower back and joint pains can benefit from weight reduction strategies.

Some people may need aids such as a walking stick to help them move. Correcting joint misalignment can also help with managing pain.

"If someone with flat feet has pain around his or her heels, ankles and knees, then a visit to the podiatrist for assessment of his or her footwear and supportive insoles in the shoes may relieve his or her symptoms," she says.

Sleep is also important, she adds. Someone with poor sleep will perceive his or her pain more strongly.

In Madam Tan's case, she is on medication to manage her autoimmune condition.

At the start, she struggled with stress, anxiety, loss of appetite and the inability to accept her illness. She now thinks more positively and finds that exercise helps with mood and chronic pain.

She also does yoga stretches on the bed every morning for 15 to 20 minutes, which helps with morning aches.

She swims and does yoga weekly, but also listens to her body. If there are flare-ups of her condition, she will slow down her activities, including work, and take a break.

"Mentally, I have now accepted my condition and learnt to manage my pain," she says. "My life is back to normal."

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Pain from knee osteoarthritis can affect a person's ability to move. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



# What to eat or drink when you have a cold

What are the best foods or drinks to consume when I have a cold?

If you search for the answers online, you will find plenty of articles claiming that certain "immune-boosting" foods or drinks – such as garlic, citrus, cranberries, chilli pepper and pomegranate juice – can ease symptoms or speed up recovery from a common cold.

But "we do not have strong enough information suggesting that everyone should be eating specific foods during a viral infection", said Dr Colleen Tewksbury, an assistant professor in nutrition science at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.

That said, it is important to feed yourself well, she said. A cold – especially if it affects your sense of taste and smell – can squelch your appetite, yet your body still needs calories and nutrients to function and fight the infection, she added.

"Anything you can do that will help you feel a bit more comforted and meet some of your nutritional needs during that time will be helpful."

Dr Tewksbury suggested turning to hydrating and nourishing foods and drinks that are comforting, such as the ones you were given when you were sick as a child or those grounded in your cultural traditions.

SOUP IS BACKED BY A BIT OF SCIENCE

"Soup tends to be a good go-to," Dr Tewksbury said – especially if it includes a healthy balance of nutrients, including protein (such as beans or chicken), carbohydrates (rice, noodles or potatoes), some fat (from meat, oils or dairy) and "veggies that will pack in some additional vitamin and mineral punches".

Soup is filling, nourishing and helps with fluid intake, she added.

According to Dr Stephen Rennard, a professor of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, there is a little bit of laboratory-based science to back it up.

In 2000, Dr Rennard and his team published a study that investigated how chicken soup affects the body's neutrophils, immune cells that travel to the site of infection and initiate inflammation, contributing to symptoms including sore throat and cough.

In the lab, researchers placed neutrophils in small plastic wells and added a substance that usually attracts them, similar to what happens during an infection. But when the cells were bathed in chicken soup, they did not migrate nearly as much towards the substance.



Soup, if it contains a healthy balance of nutrients, is filling, nourishing and helps with fluid intake. PHOTO: NYTIMES

In the study, Dr Rennard used a recipe from the family of his wife, Barbara, who was also a co-author. It calls for a whole chicken simmered with carrots, celery, parsnips, onions, turnips and sweet potatoes, served with matzo balls.

Dr Rennard also tested 13 canned or instant soups in the study, including a few vegetarian options, and most slowed the movement of neutrophils to some degree.

A couple of small human studies have also suggested that sipping soup or a hot drink, even just hot water, can help loosen nasal mucus and make breathing feel easier. And of course, any liquid provides fluids, and "hydration makes it easier to clear secretions", Dr Rennard said.

HONEY CAN HELP

Multiple randomised controlled trials have found that honey can reduce the frequency and severity of night-time coughing in children, in some cases better than over-the-counter cough syrups.

There is less research among adults, but a systematic review published in 2020 suggested that honey's benefits may extend to

other age groups.

It is not clear how honey helps to quell a cough, but researchers have hypothesised that its throat-coating, antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties may contribute.

But do not give honey to infants who are younger than 12 months old because it might contain bacteria that can cause a serious condition called infant botulism. For children older than one year, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends giving half to one teaspoon of honey as needed – eat it right out of the spoon or stir into a cup of hot tea.

GO EASY ON ALCOHOL

Some cold sufferers may seek comfort in a hot toddy, which traditionally includes a splash of whiskey and honey in hot water. But keep in mind that drinking alcohol when you are taking medications for cold, cough and allergy symptoms can be dangerous, especially if the medications include acetaminophen, which can cause liver damage if mixed with alcohol, warned Dr Tewksbury.

Alcohol can also be dehydrating, and though there is not much research on this point, it stands to reason that drinking while sick with a virus might worsen how you feel, she added.

That being said, if a hot toddy is what you are craving when you have the sniffles and you are not taking any medications that will negatively interact with alcohol, she said she would not discourage mixing a drink. Just remember that it probably will not help you heal any quicker.

You can also make a non-alcoholic

hot toddy using tea instead of liquor and adding flavour with honey, lemon, ginger or other spices.

THE MILK-MUCUS EFFECT IS MURKY

Many people believe that drinking cow's milk increases mucus production, but research testing this belief is limited, with mixed results.

Several Australian studies published in the 1990s found no link between milk drinking and mucus, including among people infected with a common cold virus. Yet, in a recent trial of 108 adults who did not have colds but who suffered from chronic overproduction of mucus, researchers found that those following a dairy-free diet for six days had reduced self-reported snot secretions.

"There is little evidence that dairy universally increases mucus production for everyone," Dr Tewksbury said. But this may vary from person to person, so if dairy makes you feel phlegmy, avoiding it when you have a cold is reasonable, she said.

Otherwise, dairy products can be a convenient and balanced source of nutrition. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends blending frozen fruit with milk, or soya milk, for a nutritious and hydrating smoothie for children when they are sick.

In the end, "food is so personal", Dr Tewksbury said. When you are feeling flattened by a cold, she suggested asking yourself: "What are the things that can help me feel most nourished during this time, to help support myself? And that's different for everybody." NYTIMES

specialist	specialist	specialist
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