Sahlgrenska Academy  
at University of Gothenburg  
Department of Internal Medicine and Clinical Nutrition

Abstract

Title: A vegetarian diet, a possible treatment complement for relief of symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis? A systematic review.

Author: Alexandra Ahlsén and Caroline Forsberg

Supervisor: Mette Axelsen

Examiner: Anna Winkvist

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Background: Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic remitting polyarthritis that is relapsing. Symptoms are inflammation of the joints with pain, stiffness and degradation of joint tissue. In some cases, also other parts of the body are involved. The treatment consists of medications to reduce pain, inflammation and degradation of joint tissue. Today, the offered nutritional treatment is primarily focused on meeting energy requirements and nutrient needs. The diet has also been discussed as symptomatic treatment, and one of the factors believed to influence the symptoms is meat.

Objective: To assess the evidence as to whether a vegetarian diet affects the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, and if so, to suggest how it can be implemented in practical dietetics work.

Search strategy: The databases used in the literature search was PubMed, Scopus, and AMED. The search words used were: "rheumatoid arthritis", "vegetarian", "vegan", "diet", "meat" and "animal protein".

Selection criteria: Studies investigating a vegetarian diet on the symptoms of RA were included. Only RCT, clinical trial, controlled clinical trial, human studies and original articles in English or Swedish were included. Studies that only studied fasting or elemental diet were excluded.

Data collection and analysis: Two studies matched the above mentioned inclusion criteria and had moderate study quality. The conclusions were graded according to GRADE on the following outcome measures: pain, number of tender joints, duration of morning stiffness, and the inflammation markers ESR and CRP.
Main results:

- There is no basis for the effect of vegetarian diet on pain in patients with RA (very low evidence strength).

- A vegetarian diet might perhaps reduce the number of tender joints, the duration of morning stiffness nor the inflammation markers ESR and CRP in people with RA compared to an omnivore diet (low evidence strength).

Conclusions: As one study points to significant positive effect, and another study on insignificant results of vegetarian diet on symptoms of RA, it is concluded that vegetarian diet may affect the symptoms. However, based on the documentary evidence, this is not recommended as a general treatment for all patients with RA, but should not be discouraged if the patient is interested in this as a complement to traditional treatment.