

You, RA and Food Choices

Food – a fully-loaded four-letter word. Nutrition, culture, allergies, addictions, habits, business, and politics, can all be packed into the things you put into your mouth. When you google rheumatoid arthritis (RA), and diet, you'll find a smorgasbord of options that can make it hard to know what to do.

My experience

I've struggled with being over-weight my entire life. While I knew that those extra pounds were hard on my joints, I couldn't seem to make the necessary changes. I am happy to report that I am finally comfortable in my own skin. Through lifestyle changes, I have released the unwanted pounds.

It's been a process to get to this point. It begins in the heart; the place I go to [address my stress](#). In turn, that allows me to make better lifestyle choices. I also stopped using the word diet. This four-letter word leaves a bad taste in my mouth; I've started and failed far too many diet plans. When I use the word “lifestyle” instead of “diet”, I find it gives me the freedom to make adjustments to suit me. After all, I am the “driver” of this particular “vehicle”.

The 5 W's

When, what, and how to eat – everyone has an opinion; even the experts can't agree. Do you go gluten-free, sugar-free, or dairy-free? Should you try fasting or intermittent-fasting? Perhaps you'll experiment with one of the following diets: Weight Watchers, Paleo, Raw-food, Mediterranean, Vegetarian, Vegan, Pescatarian, or [Fruitarian](#), as shown in this funny scene from the movie Notting Hill.

As for the why, you may wish to reduce inflammation, take some weight off your joints and/or adopt a healthier lifestyle. Whatever your reasons it pays to do your research.

If you're wondering about the how, here is a list of things to take into account:

- 1. Have a clear picture of what you hope to accomplish.** Spend time visualizing your healthier self as you choose nutritious foods that support you through all the stages of your life.
- 2. DIY (Do it yourself), or enlist the help of professionals.** Some people get a great deal of satisfaction out of being the master of their own lives. While others prefer to have the guidance and support of a professional. Nutritionists, dietitians, or naturopaths are well-equipped to help you.
- 3. Temper your taste buds.** If you're adding new foods into your diet, keep in mind that you may need to give you and your taste buds time to get used to the changes.
- 4. Cultivate patience.** Whether you wish to reduce inflammation or lose weight, patience is a great skill to develop. You did not get the way you are overnight, so why are you expecting overnight changes? Some sources report that it can take up to a year or more to see the benefits from certain diets.
- 5. Stress, self-sabotage, and honoring yourself.** Falling off the wagon. Cheating. Failing, yet again! When you have a set-back, your first response may be to beat yourself up. Stop it! It creates stress and in my experience, sets you back. Instead, recognize it for what it is, then make better choices for the rest of the day.
 - 1. One size, er diet, may not fit all.** What works for one may not work for another person. Allergies, sensitivities, ethnic background, environment, and even [epigenetics](#) can influence how you react to the food you ingest. There's a new field called [nutrigenetics](#) that can pinpoint how individual gene variations can have an effect upon diet and exercise.
- 6. Food guides vary from country to country.** Thanks to internet, you can view the food guides

from different nations. How does your food guide compare? Keep in mind that lobby groups can have an influence in the recommendations. (See the recent sugar vs fat [news article](#).)

7. **Notice how you feel.** Your mood can be influenced by food. Dependent upon the source you access, the amount of inflammation you experience can be tempered by what you eat. Be vigilant about drawing correlations between what you eat and how you feel physically, mentally and emotionally, an hour after you eat, or the next day. This can help you make better choices.

Other considerations:

- **Adequate nutrition.** Vitamins, minerals, protein. Are you getting too much, or not enough?
- **Share with your healthcare team.** They may have recommendations that you may not have considered. Keep in mind that some professionals may not ask about your diet. My rheumatologist never did.
- **Planning.** Organization can help you be successful. Make sure you have the right kinds of food on hand. Check out new recipes. Take cooking classes. Take an interest in where your food come from and how it is grown. Get excited about your new lifestyle.
- **Monitor how you feel.** The bottom line is you. Your energy levels. Your skin. Your hair. How you sleep. Inflammation levels. Your body is giving you feedback all the time. Tune in to what it is telling you.

Food is one segment of the circle of health and well-being. Since you have to eat anyway, so why not make choices that support you in your journey through life with rheumatoid arthritis?

What successes have you had with your lifestyle changes? Let's celebrate the big ones and the small ones!

Note: This article originally appeared on RA hub on HealthCentral.com in 2016.