Controlled Trial of Fasting and One-Year Vegetarian Diet in Rheumatoid Arthritis

The Lancet


FROM ABSTRACT:

Fasting is an effective treatment for rheumatoid arthritis, but most patients relapse on reintroduction of food.

The effect of fasting followed by one year of a vegetarian diet was assessed in a randomised, single-blind controlled trial.

27 patients were allocated to a four-week stay at a health farm. After an initial 7-10 day subtotal fast, they were put on an individually adjusted gluten-free vegan diet for 3.5 months.

The food was then gradually changed to a lactovegetarian diet for the remainder of the study.

A control group of 26 patients stayed for four weeks at a convalescent home, but ate an ordinary diet throughout the whole study period.

After four weeks at the health farm the diet group showed a significant improvement in number of tender joints, Ritchie's articular index, number of swollen joints, pain score, duration of morning stiffness, grip strength, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein, white blood cell count, and a health assessment questionnaire score. These did not improve in the control group.

The benefits in the diet group were still present after one year, and evaluation of the whole course showed significant advantages for the diet group in all measured indices.

This dietary regimen seems to be a useful supplement to conventional medical treatment of rheumatoid arthritis.

THESE AUTHORS ALSO NOTE:

Most general practitioners and rheumatologists note that patients with rheumatoid arthritis often have improved symptoms by eliminating certain foods.

Fasting reduces objective and subjective indices of rheumatoid arthritis disease activity.
These authors evaluated the effect of a short fast followed by a one-year vegetarian diet in patients with rheumatoid arthritis.

This study used 53 patients with confirmed rheumatoid arthritis. Through this study they were allowed to continue using the pain drugs including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. However, they were not allowed to consume omega-3 fatty acid supplements [because they are powerfully anti-inflammatory].

This study is a 13-month prospective, single-blinded, randomized clinical trial.

27 subjects were assigned to the diet group and 26 subjects were assigned as controls.

The diet subjects began with a 7-10 day fast allowing only herbal teas, garlic, vegetable broth, and juices from carrots-beets-celery. Fruit juices were not allowed.

After this fast of 7-10 days, new foods were introduced one at a time, every other day. If the introduction of a food increased pain, stiffness or joint swelling within 2-48 hours, that food was omitted from the diet for the next year. For the first 3-5 months of the study the following typically aggravating foods were not allowed: gluten [wheat, rye, oats, barley], meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, refined sugar, citrus fruits, salt, strong spices, alcoholic beverages, regular tea [herbal teas were allowed], coffee and preservative chemicals.

The control group was allowed to eat an ordinary mix of foods.

Both the diet patients and the control subjects were evaluated by assessing visual analog scale, duration of morning stiffness, functional grading, general health assessments, the Ritchie’s articular index, the number of painful or tender joints on movement, the number of swollen joints, the magnitude of grip strength, and blood analysis of hemoglobin, ESR, platelet count white blood cell count, C-reactive protein, and albumin.

The diet subjects, after 1 month, showed measurable decreases in the number of tender joints, Ritchie’s articular index, the number of swollen joints, duration of morning stiffness, C-reactive protein, white blood cell count and platelet count. The control patients showed no measurable improvements in these indices and “at the end of the study [1 year later] they had deteriorated.”

“A statistically significant improvement was seen in the diet group for all indices except for platelet count and hemoglobin.”

“The diet group lost more weight than the control group.”

DISCUSSION

“Although most patients with rheumatoid arthritis benefit from a short period of fasting, nearly all relapse on reintroduction of food.”
This study shows that the “improvement can be sustained by an individually adjusted dietary regimen.”

These authors conclude “food allergy or intolerance is involved in some degree in the pathogenesis of rheumatoid arthritis.”

“Interest has been drawn to dietary fatty acids and their ability to modulate the inflammatory process.” [Important]

“A switch to vegetarian diet causes an extensive change of the profile of the fatty acids.” These changes favor production of prostaglandins and leukotrienes with less inflammatory activity.

These authors conclude that in “some patients a substantial reduction in disease [rheumatoid arthritis] activity can be obtained by fasting followed by an individually adjusted vegetarian diet.”

**KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY:**

1) These authors found that a successful adjunct to the management of rheumatoid arthritis is a 7-10 day fast followed by a one-year, individually adjusted vegetarian diet. This regime showed significant advantages in both subjective and objective measures of rheumatoid disease activity as compared to controls, and the benefits lasted more than a year.

2) In this study both the diet patients and the controls were not allowed to consume omega-3 fatty acid supplements [because they are powerfully anti-inflammatory].

3) A successful fast allows consumption of herbal teas, garlic, vegetable broth, and juices from carrots-beets-celery. Fruit juices are not allowed.

4) A successful method to individually adjust the diet away from foods that create inflammatory problems is to fast for 7-10 days, followed by the introduction of a single new food, one at a time, every other day. If the introduction of the food increased pain, stiffness or joint swelling within 2-48 hours, that food was omitted from the diet.

5) The following foods are considered to be largely inflammatory and disease promoting: gluten [wheat, rye, oats, barley], meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, refined sugar, citrus fruits, salt, strong spices, alcoholic beverages, regular tea [herbal teas were allowed], coffee and preservative chemicals.

6) “A switch to vegetarian diet causes an extensive change of the profile of the fatty acids.” These changes favor production of prostaglandins and leukotrienes with less inflammatory activity.