



Symptom-reducing New Year's Resolutions

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When you have chronic health conditions like rheumatoid arthritis or diabetes, keeping New Year's resolutions can be tough. But some changes could make a big difference in your symptoms this year. Find out which are worth the time and effort...

Nearly everyone promises to improve their lives when Jan. 1 rolls around. But if you have a chronic health condition such as diabetes or arthritis, New Year's resolutions may seem harder to make and stick to over the long term.

Still, it's worth the effort. Altering a few bad habits and adopting new ones could make the difference between suffering more and reducing symptoms, specialists say.

For example, if you have rheumatoid arthritis, knowing how to reduce inflammation can make you feel energized, not exhausted, says Joseph Colella, M.D., a bariatric surgeon and director of robotic surgery at Magee Women's Hospital and St. Margaret's Hospital at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

And if you have osteoarthritis, learning exercises to strengthen core abdominal muscles could relieve pain in your back or hips, notes David Fabi, M.D., an orthopedic and joint replacement surgeon at Scripps Mercy Hospital in San Diego.

So which changes should you consider making this year? Read on for 12 doctor-recommended tips to improve your chronic condition.

Chronic health conditions: Osteoarthritis

New Year's Resolution #1: Get a move on – outside.

Sure, it's cold outside, but that's no excuse to sit on your comfy sofa all day.

First, you need to get moving. Exercise fights arthritis-related stiffness and discomfort by strengthening muscles around joints and keeping them aligned, notes Ronald P. Reichman, M.D., a specialist in rheumatology and internal medicine at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Plus, exercising outdoors is more motivating, reduces stress and tension and improves mood better than indoor workouts, according to a 2011 British study. People who exercised outdoors were more likely to stay with their exercise regimen, the study found.

Improve your health: Go out for a hike, bike ride (assuming paths are clear of ice and snow), or daily 30-minute walk around your neighborhood.

And don't worry that frigid temperatures will worsen pain, says Jennie Hootman, Ph.D., an

epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control's arthritis program.

Cold won't harm joints as long as you stretch before and after exercising, dress warmly in layers and wear shoes with good traction to prevent falling on slippery surfaces, she says. Warm [gloves or mittens](#) and socks will also keep extremities toasty.

New Year's Resolution #2: Eat more broccoli.

Mom said to eat your veggies, but she probably didn't know that cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli provide an extra health boost if you have osteoarthritis: They can help prevent joint damage.

That's because they contain sulforaphane, a compound that blocks enzymes that cause joint erosion, according to a 2010 three-year British study.

Improve your health: It's easy to add sulforaphane-rich veggies to your diet. Besides, broccoli, eat more kale, bok choy, Brussels sprouts and raw cabbage (especially Savoy or red varieties). Check out [these Lifescript recipes](#) for tasty ways to dish them up.

New Year's Resolution #3: Lose extra weight.

For most Americans, losing weight is a smart health move. But it's especially good for osteoarthritis sufferers; in fact, it reduces symptoms more effectively than any other treatment, according to Patience White, M.D., vice president of public health for the Arthritis Foundation and a rheumatologist at the George Washington University School of Medicine, in Washington, D.C.

Being overweight puts significant pressure on the joints, and losing at least 5.1 percent of your body weight can reduce your arthritis-related disability as much as 95 percent, according to a 2007 research analysis in the British Medical Journal.

Improve your health: Find a [diet and exercise plan](#) that's enjoyable, so you'll stick with it. Then keep yourself motivated with the promise of less pain. For every pound you lose, your knees will feel as if you've lost five, according to Elizabeth G. Matzkin, M.D., chief of Women's Sports Medicine in the Department of Orthopedics at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

New Year's Resolution #4: Whittle your middle.

Losing weight also helps RA patients because it reduces pressure on joints. But here's added motivation to shed pounds: Fat cells produce cytokines, proteins that increase inflammation.

Belly fat is the most dangerous kind, because it's especially likely to trigger inflammation that can worsen RA symptoms, according to a 2007 study conducted at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

"If you're overweight, you're carrying around an inflammation-making machine," explains Nathan Wei, M.D., a rheumatologist and internist in Frederick, Md.

Improve your health: Consult a nutritionist or doctor for an RA-friendly weight-loss program, suggests Peter Vash, M.D., M.Ph., executive medical director of the Lindora Clinic in Costa Mesa, Calif.

Some RA medications, such as corticosteroids, can make weight loss more difficult, so ask your doctor about using different drugs or reducing dosages, Dr. Vash adds.

To lose belly fat, exercise daily, incorporating stretching, low-impact cardio and strengthening workouts, Dr. Wei advises. Need help getting started? Here are top [tips to beat the bulge](#).

New Year's Resolution #5: Do the right stretch.

When working out, it's important to stretch to boost blood flow to muscles, loosen them and reduce the risk of an injury that could trigger arthritis pain, says Neil Roth, M.D., an orthopedic specialist and head of sports medicine at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York.

But don't do it before working out. Instead, do a "warm stretch" a few minutes after beginning to exercise to prevent stiffness, especially if you're doing something new or you haven't exercised in a few weeks, Dr. Roth advises.

Improve your health: "Go running or hop on a bike and cycle at a slow pace for 5 minutes to warm up muscles," he says. "Then stop running or get off your bike, and do your stretches."

New Year's Resolution #6: Eat healthier fats.

Omega-3 fatty acids, the healthful fats found in fish, walnuts and flaxseeds, help reduce joint swelling and pain in people with RA, according to a 2011 study at Children's Hospital in Boston.

On the other hand, too much omega-6 fatty acids – found in the refined vegetable oils used in most snacks and other processed foods – can worsen joint problems by making inflammatory enzymes more active.

So try to find a balance: A diet with one part omega-3 fats for every 2-3 parts omega-6 fats can suppress inflammation in RA patients, according to a 2008 report in *Experimental Biology and Medicine*.

Improve your health: [Eat more](#) oily fish such as salmon and mackerel, along with nuts, flaxseeds and omega-3 fortified eggs. And eat fewer omega-6-filled snack foods and fast foods; cut back on corn, sunflower, safflower and soy oils; and switch to extra virgin olive oil in your salad dressing.

Chronic health conditions: Diabetes

New Year's Resolution #7: Ditch sweet drinks.

Drinking two sweetened beverages per day – such as soda or fruit juice – can cause enough weight gain to raise your chance of developing type 2 diabetes by 26 percent, a 2010 Harvard study found.

Abdominal, or visceral, fat has been linked to a higher risk of type 2 diabetes, as well as heart disease, stroke and some cancers, according to the American Diabetes Association.

Sugary drinks also spike blood sugar levels, causing diabetics to need more insulin, bariatric surgeon Dr. Colella says.

Sugar-free sodas may be better, but even they can [pad your waistline](#). Women who drink diet soda have a 70 percent greater increase in waist circumference than those who avoid them, according to a 2011 University of Texas study.

Drink two or more diet pops per day? Then you face a 500 percent increase, the study reported.

Improve your health: Instead of soda, drink [water](#) (infused with lemon, cucumber or mint if you want more flavor), tea or other non-caloric drinks. And ditch fruit juice for whole fruit, which has an average of 56 fewer calories and at least 25 percent more fiber per serving, according to a 2012 study by the University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition in Seattle.

New Year's Resolution #8: Go with the (whole) grain.

Need proof that whole grains are better for you than refined? People who ate 3-4 servings a day of white rice were 1.5 times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes, according to a 2012 research review by the Harvard School of Public Health.

But those who ate at least two servings of [brown rice](#) weekly had an 11 percent lower risk of type 2 diabetes, the Harvard researchers found.

And women with diabetes who ate more bran – the fiber-rich, hard outer layer of grains that's stripped out during refining – lived longer and were less likely to die of heart disease, according to another 2010 [Harvard study](#).

Improve your health: Choose whole grains. Besides eating brown rice, buy breads with whole wheat or another whole grain listed first in the ingredient list to make sure you're getting the [real thing](#).

New Year's Resolution #9: Eat more beans.

Another small dietary change could have big benefits: Eating a cup of beans every day can help people with type 2 diabetes control blood sugar and reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke, according to a 2012 Canadian [study](#) published in Archives of Internal Medicine.

That's because beans have protein, which helps slow a rise in blood sugar levels, and fiber, which helps reduce cholesterol, the researchers note.

Improve your health: Add beans to your diet by mixing them in a [salad](#), serving them as a [side dish](#), or simmer some homemade [soup](#), [chili](#) or [stew](#).

Chronic health conditions: Chronic Pain

New Year's Resolution #10: Catch more zzz's.

Getting more sleep could ease your pain. When mildly sleep-deprived volunteers slept 1.8 hours more per night for four nights, they were more alert during the day and their sensitivity to pain was reduced, according to a December 2012 study published in the journal Sleep.

That's because sleep deprivation activates the nervous system's pain pathways, explains Alpana Gowda, M.D., clinical instructor in pain medicine at Stanford University and co-author of [The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pain Relief](#) (Alpha).

Some pain medications interfere with sleep, notes pulmonologist Nidhi Undevia, M.D., medical director of the Center for Sleep Disorders at Loyola University in Illinois. For example, narcotics can disrupt rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, and over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen may inhibit the sleep hormone melatonin.

Improve your health: First, consult your doctor if you're having sleep problems that may be related to

your medications, Dr. Undevia says.

Also, establish good sleep habits. Pain patients got more sleep when they maintained a regular bedtime schedule, according to a 2010 study by the University of Rochester in New York. Controlling noise and light in the bedroom also helps, the study found.

New Year's Resolution #11: Get more vitamin D.

About 77 percent of Americans are deficient in vitamin D, which is vital to building strong bones and teeth, according to a 2009 Mayo Clinic study. And extremely low levels are linked with chronic pain that doesn't respond to treatment.

In fact, chronic pain patients with low vitamin D levels who took narcotics for pain needed twice as much medication to get relief compared to patients with healthy levels of the vitamin.

Improve your health: See your doctor for a simple blood test to determine your vitamin D levels. Anything under 32 nanograms per milliliter of blood is considered insufficient; under 20 is deficient, according to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a Washington, D.C., nonprofit.

Women younger than 70 years old should get 600 IU of vitamin D daily, according to IOM recommendations. Your doctor may recommend more if you're deficient.

To boost levels:

- Take a supplement or multivitamin with vitamin D3 (the kind your body uses best). Ask your doctor for the right dose.
- Eat [foods](#) high in vitamin D3, such as egg yolks, fish and vitamin D3-fortified milk, orange juice and cereals, the Mayo Clinic advises.
- Your body makes vitamin D when sunlight hits your skin. Just 13 minutes of summer sun exposure three times a week was enough for sufficient levels of the vitamin in fair-skinned people (more is required for those with darker skin), according to a [2010 study](#) published in *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*. But keep in mind that UV radiation can also be hazardous – the American Academy of Dermatology advises against seeking out extra sun exposure to raise your vitamin D levels.

New Year's Resolution #12: Quit smoking.

If you need more motivation to give up the butts, here it is: Lower-back pain patients felt significantly less discomfort after they quit smoking, according to a December 2012 study published in *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*. Continuing smokers had no improvement.

"Nicotine increases pain," explains researcher Glenn Rehtine, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at the University of Rochester in New York. "In this study, if you quit smoking during treatment, you got better."

Improve your health: Weigh any benefit you think you're getting from smoking to continued back pain or an increased likelihood of needing surgery. No brainer, right? We have everything you'll need to quit at [Lifescrypt's Smoking Cessation Health Center](#).

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