

Therapies to Try for Natural Pain Relief

Medication isn't the only path to pain relief. Find out how to get natural pain relief with alternative approaches.

By [Juhie Bhatia](#), Medically reviewed by [Kevin O. Hwang, MD, MPH](#) via <http://www.everydayhealth.com>

Pain can impact the entire body, from your joints and back to your head and hips, often making even the simplest movement difficult. While over-the-counter and prescription drugs are often used to manage chronic pain, more and more people are turning to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies for natural pain relief. These therapies, such as yoga, massage, and mind-body techniques, are often used in conjunction with medication.

Though many alternative and complementary treatments haven't been as thoroughly studied by mainstream medical researchers as other therapies, they're still popular for pain relief. Some not only provide a break in the stress-pain link, but also give you more physical flexibility to make moving easier. "In our estimation about one-third of pain patients are using complementary and alternative medicine, and the literature supports these figures," says Carmen Green, MD, associate professor of anesthesiology and director of pain medicine research at the University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor.

Natural Pain Relief: The Alternatives

Different [alternative treatments](#) are used to provide natural pain relief for different [kinds of pain](#). Some common therapies include:

- **Exercise.** Movement, whether it's walking or pool therapy, is key to pain relief. "Exercise is at the top of my list of non-medication solutions for pain," says Jennifer Schneider, MD, PhD, a chronic pain specialist and author of the book *Living With Chronic Pain*. Dr. Schneider says, "The less you do, the less you use your muscles, the more it hurts when you finally use your muscles." Increase your movements gradually, though, and consult a doctor if you're concerned about how exercise may initially affect your pain.
- **Yoga.** Another type of movement that may be beneficial for pain relief is yoga. Though more research is needed, one small study found that yoga was more effective for managing chronic lower [back pain](#) than following the advice in a self-care book. Be cautious when doing yoga, though, and start with simple, gentle poses. "Some stretches or postures have the potential to aggravate pain conditions or bring up new pain problems," says Sam Moon, MD, MPH, associate director of education at Duke Integrative Medicine and an associate professor in the department of community and family medicine at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C.
- **Acupuncture.** This technique is widely used for pain relief, whether it's for back pain or [headaches](#). It's thought that one way acupuncture relieves pain is by increasing the release of feel-good chemicals called endorphins, which block pain. Dr. Green points out that, while acupuncture works for some patients, more studies are needed to determine who will benefit most from it and when to use it.
- **Massage.** Massage may have therapeutic benefits for people who suffer from pain, since it also aids in the release of endorphins, according to the American Pain Foundation. Additionally, massage can increase the range of motion in the joints. If you decide to add massage to your pain management strategy, be sure to visit a licensed massage therapist, preferably one with experience in pain management.
- **Mind-Body Techniques.** These approaches, such as meditation, can allow people to relax tense muscles, reduce anxiety, and alter their mental state, according to the American Pain Foundation. "A variety of mind-body therapies — including hypnosis, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and cognitive-behavioral therapy — are scientifically proven treatments for chronic pain," says Dr. Moon.

Natural Pain Relief: Getting Started

Though complementary and alternative therapies are a natural route to pain relief, if you are being treated for a chronic condition or have health issues, consult your doctor before starting one of these treatments. Also, keep in mind that the effect on pain of these therapies is still being studied, so be sure to ask about their safety and efficacy before adding them to your [pain management](#) plan.

Supplements for Pain Relief

WebMD Feature, <http://www.webmd.com/>

By [R. Morgan Griffin](#), Reviewed By [David Kiefer, MD](#)

"I think supplements can be the cornerstone of good pain management," says David C. Leopold, MD, director of Integrative Medical Education at the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in San Diego. "People are also looking to supplements more and more. They have less tolerance for the side effects of traditional pain medications. They want something different."

Here's a rundown of the chronic pain supplements that our experts thought were most important.

Anti-inflammatory plants and herbs. Chronic inflammation contributes to many painful conditions, including osteoarthritis and back pain. Anti-inflammatory medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen work well because they block the enzymes that trigger both swelling and pain.

"There are natural alternatives to NSAIDs that have a similar mechanism," says Leopold. They include turmeric, green tea, ginger, rosemary, cat's claw, devil's claw, and willow bark.

Which pain supplement is best? Leopold and other experts single out turmeric. "It works really well," says Tanya Edwards, MD, medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic. "I've had patients with arthritis who start using turmeric and are able to go off their NSAIDs entirely." Look for turmeric in standardized capsules.

Because they work in the same way as NSAIDs, these pain supplements do pose some of the same risks, such as bleeding and stomach upset. However, the side effects tend to be less severe. Leopold still suggests that people on blood-thinning drugs check with a doctor before using any of these pain supplements.

Fish oil. "Fish oil is the clean-up hitter of supplements," says David P. Rakel, MD, founder and director of the University of Wisconsin's Integrative Medicine Program in Madison. There's strong evidence that it helps with many conditions, ranging from cardiovascular problems to depression to asthma. Fish oil can also ease the inflammation and pain caused by many chronic conditions. The dose used in the most convincing research is 2 to 4 grams of DHA + EPA daily (read labels carefully!). Although beneficial omega-3 fatty acids are available from other sources, experts say that fish oil has the best evidence. "I recommend omega-3s to everybody, including those with chronic pain," says Leopold. He says that they help with headaches, back pain, some nerve pain, and autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid arthritis. "The pain relief you get from fish oil alone is not tremendous," notes Rakel. You can boost the painkilling effects of fish oil by combining it with other pain supplements like turmeric or ginger, says Rakel. But first check with your doctor to be sure those combinations are safe for you.

Vitamin D. A number of studies have linked low levels of vitamin D with increased levels of chronic pain. One 2009 study looked at the vitamin D levels of people with chronic pain who were using opioid painkillers. Those who had a deficiency of vitamin D needed almost twice as high a dose of medication to control their pain. Edwards now checks vitamin D levels in many of her patients with chronic pain. If they're lower than 50 to 70 nanograms/milliliter, she might recommend a supplement for natural pain relief. "Personally, I've seen miracles," she says. "I've found that it can have a huge benefit in the symptoms of people with fibromyalgia." She reports that it's helpful with other kinds of chronic pain too, like bone and joint pain.

Capsaicin. Capsaicin comes from chili peppers and may soothe pain when applied to the skin. "Topical capsaicin seems to be helpful for all sorts of pain," says Edwards. Studies have found it can help relieve pain from rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, psoriasis, shingles, and diabetic neuropathy. It may also offer natural pain relief for back pain, fibromyalgia pain, and headaches. Beware: Your pain may worsen for a few days before it improves when you use capsaicin. And there's a risk of skin irritation. Wash your hands very well after applying capsaicin. Don't touch your eyes or other sensitive areas when you have traces of capsaicin on your hands.

Glucosamine sulfate. "When it comes to joint pain, I think glucosamine supplements have some of the best data out there," says Leopold. There's especially strong evidence that this pain supplement can help relieve osteoarthritis pain in the knee. Glucosamine is often combined with chondroitin, which could have an additional benefit. Leopold says that the studies suggest that glucosamine not only eases pain, but also slows the progression of osteoarthritis.

SAMe. There's good evidence that SAMe offers natural pain relief to people with osteoarthritis. Some studies have found that it's about as effective as prescription painkillers like Celebrex. But there's a catch to this pain supplement: the cost. "SAMe can run \$80-\$120 a month," says Edwards, "so I tend not to use it very much. I can usually get results that are just as good with less expensive treatments."

Magnesium. The evidence is mixed. But some studies have found that magnesium supplements can help with pain caused by conditions like migraines, muscle spasms, and fibromyalgia. Some experts speculate that magnesium deficiency could be a widespread problem. "It's really easy to be magnesium deficient," says Edwards, who recommends magnesium supplements for her chronic pain patients. "The foods that are highest in magnesium are things like sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds. Most of us just don't eat those very often." Regularly drinking alcohol can also deplete your magnesium levels.

Acetyl-L-carnitine. Several studies have found that the nutrient acetyl-L-carnitine can ease nerve pain from diabetes. This pain supplement also seems to regenerate damaged nerves and, over time, restore sensitivity.

Alpha-lipoic acid. Like acetyl-L-carnitine, alpha-lipoic acid seems to help with diabetic neuropathy. "Preliminary but promising evidence shows that it not only reduces pain, but also seems to slow down the progression of the nerve injury," Rakel tells WebMD. "It may help protect the nerves from further damage." Alpha-lipoic acid may also enhance insulin sensitivity -- another benefit for people with diabetes. There's evidence that this pain supplement can help with nerve damage caused by cancer treatments, too.

Bromelain. The enzyme bromelain, which comes from the pineapple plant, appears to reduce inflammation and pain. Some studies have found it helpful in osteoarthritis and knee pain. There's some uncertainty about how well it gets absorbed in digestion, given that it could be neutralized by stomach acid. More research needs to be done.

Riboflavin (vitamin B2). "There was promising research showing that riboflavin might help reduce the frequency of migraines," says Rakel, but a recent study did not support the claim. Rakel still thinks it's safe to try for up to eight weeks, given its high safety rating. There's some evidence that CoQ10 and standardized extracts of butterbur (petasites) might also help prevent migraines.

MSM (methylsulfonylmethane). This is a naturally occurring compound in some plants and animals, which has been shown in some preliminary research to reduce osteoarthritis pain. More studies are needed to clarify its safety and efficacy.

Chronic Pain Supplements: Combining Approaches

As effective as natural pain relief can be, Leopold urges people to keep an open mind about traditional approaches, too. "NSAIDs like ibuprofen and naproxen work really well," says Leopold, "and they're incredibly cheap. The price tag on some supplements can be substantial." Natural pain relief and traditional medicine don't have to stand in opposition. Leopold has some patients who take a daily pain supplement like turmeric for pain. Then during exacerbations, they add on an NSAID. That said, no one should be mixing pain supplements and medications without seeing a doctor first. It could be risky. So make sure your health care provider knows about all the medicines and supplements you use.

Herbal Remedies for Natural Pain Relief

Don't want to turn to drugs for pain management? Find out how to get all-natural relief. By [Juhie Bhatia](#)
Medically reviewed by [Kevin O. Hwang, MD, MPH](#) via <http://www.everydayhealth.com/>

Pharmaceutical drugs may not be your only path to pain relief. Natural [pain treatments](#) — like herbal medicine, in which parts of a plant are used medicinally to treat health problems — is an increasingly popular way to manage pain as well. Though research on herbal remedies is still in its early phases, many herbs are thought to provide pain management and decrease inflammation. However, it's important to exercise caution. "Herbals or other nutraceuticals that may help in some way — as well as those which may not actually help — do almost universally have the potential to harm through unwanted side effects, allergic reactions, and undesirable interactions with other substances and medicines," says Sam Moon, MD, MPH, associate director of education at Duke Integrative Medicine, a division of Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C. "Relative safety must be very carefully balanced against likely effectiveness."

Natural Pain Relief: Popular Herbal Options

Here are some common herbal remedies used for natural pain relief:

- **Capsaicin.** Derived from hot chile peppers, topical capsaicin may be useful for some people in relieving pain. "Capsaicin works by depleting substance P, a compound that conveys the pain sensation from the peripheral to the central nervous system. It takes a couple of days for this to occur," says David Kiefer, MD, assistant clinical professor of medicine at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine.
- **Ginger.** Though more studies are needed, says Dr. Kiefer, ginger extract may help with joint and muscle pain because it contains phytochemicals, which help stop inflammation. Few side effects have been linked to ginger when taken in small doses.
- **Feverfew.** Feverfew has been used for centuries to treat [headaches](#), stomachaches, and toothaches. Nowadays it's also used for migraines and [rheumatoid arthritis](#). More studies are required to confirm whether feverfew is actually effective, but the herb may be worth trying since it hasn't been associated with serious side effects. Mild side effects include canker sores and irritation of the tongue and lips. Pregnant women should avoid this remedy.
- **Turmeric.** This spice has been used to relieve arthritis pain and heartburn, and to reduce inflammation. It's unclear how turmeric works against pain or inflammation, but its activity may be due to a chemical called curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory properties. Turmeric is usually safe to use, but high doses or long-term use may cause indigestion. Also, people with gallbladder disease should avoid using turmeric.
- **Devil's Claw.** There is some scientific evidence that this South African herb may be effective in managing arthritis and lower back pain, but more research is needed. Side effects are very rare if taken at a therapeutic dose for the short term, but it's not advised for pregnant women and those with gallstones or stomach or intestinal ulcers.

Natural Pain Relief: Proceed With Caution

There are many other herbal remedies for natural pain relief, such as boswellia and willow bark. The American Pain Foundation also lists these herbs for pain management:

- **Ginseng** for fibromyalgia
- **Kava Kava** for tension headaches and neuropathic pain
- **St. John's Wort** for sciatica, arthritis, and neuropathic pain
- **Valerian root** for spasms and muscle cramps

Since herbal therapies for [pain management](#) have yet to be thoroughly studied, be careful when embarking on this treatment path. Regardless of the herb you try, remember that they're not benign. Research into their safety and efficacy is still limited, and the government doesn't regulate herbal products for quality. The best course is to talk to a health-care professional before testing out a herbal remedy.

Katie Bauer's Note: Also consider Crampbark tincture for menstrual cramps and willow bark tincture or tea for headaches.