



Arthritis Products to Ease OA Pain

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Helpful Products for People With OA

As someone who has osteoarthritis (OA), I find the array of different products and “magic solutions” overwhelming sometimes. It’s confusing to see the promise of symptomatic relief from so many sources, with so many different mechanisms and varying prices.

Ultimately, a lot of us end up doing a significant amount of trial and error before settling on a product or modality we find helpful. In my time suffering from OA I have tried out many products and found a few of them helpful.

Before I delve into what has worked for me over the years, I want to explain what criteria I use to evaluate whether a product is practical to use long-term. Here are the most relevant questions I ask myself when using the product:

- Does this product provide me adequate pain relief?
- How long does it provide pain relief?
- How much does it cost to use this product per month?
- Is the pain relief worth the price?
- How many different types of this product are there?
- How practical is it to use this product every day?
- Are there any long-term side effects of using this product?
- What are the general pros and cons of using this product?

Temperature Therapy

The first category of non-pill products that have helped me is temperature therapy. This includes the soothing effects of heat and ice. Heat and ice are decent, but unfortunately limited options when it comes to alleviating pain.

Heat application is thought to ease pain by dilating the blood vessels surrounding the painful area, increasing blood flow, and helping to increase the flexibility of stiff tissues. Disposable heat pads can be found at most retailers and will last about eight to 10 hours.

When I first hurt my back, I would use a disposable heat pad every day in my rehabilitation and it was very helpful. However, as my condition progressed, heat pads didn't really help much anymore. One of the only downsides of heat pads is that they can burn your skin if left on too long.

On the other side, ice and ice packs can be very helpful for pain control. Ice is thought to partially numb the area it is applied to, helping to temporarily reduce pain. Ice also causes blood vessels to tighten, decreasing the blood flowing into the area, and that can help decrease swelling and inflammation.

Ice is always recommended for an acute injury but can also be pretty helpful for chronic pain. Applying ice onto a sore joint for about 15 to 20 minutes can have the pain-killing strength of a weak over-the-counter pain killer for up to a couple of hours.

Similar to heat pads, the main downside to ice is that it can damage your skin if applied directly for too long. Also, unlike disposable heat pads, ice is hard to bring with you to work or school because it will melt pretty quickly (believe me, I've tried). However, thanks to the innovations of the 21st century, we now have disposable ice packs!

Next page: supportive devices, TENS units and massage devices.

Supportive Devices

During the past four years I have worn a flexible back brace for long periods of time. Bracing can be very helpful for acute and chronic conditions to allow the injured tissue to heal and carry less of a weight load. It is also helpful to constrain the joint or tissue to prevent it from doing a motion that would irritate it.

Bracing also helps give a little bit of extra protection for my back to minimize something that would aggravate it. The concept of knee, hip, SI and other joint braces is similar: they provide extra support in hopes of relieving the force on the joint and minimizing the pain emitted by the joint.

One of the major downsides of bracing is it has the potential to weaken the muscles in the area if it is worn for prolonged periods of time. The weakening of muscles can cause a dependence on the brace, which could potentially worsen your condition and symptoms.

TENS Units

The TENS (transmutations electrical nerve stimulation) unit has helped me significantly in the past year with dealing with the pain. TENS units are thought to work by sending electrical stimulating pulses across the surface of the skin and along the nerve strands. These pulses scatter the body's signal of pain and helps prevent pain signals from reaching the brain.

TENS devices are also thought to stimulate your body to produce higher levels of its own natural painkillers, called endorphins. Although it is a weird concept to "shock" the pain away from our body, it is relatively simple to use.

I personally love the TENS unit because it has no major side effects, can run for hours, is rechargeable, and is very portable. One of the few downsides of TENS units is it can be a little bit expensive, ranging from \$100 to \$300. I have also heard on occasion that people develop tolerance to the effects of the TENS unit over time.

Massage Devices

The idea behind massage is that the rubbing motion helps accelerate healing by bringing nutrients and oxygen to the tissues being massaged. I prefer massage machines, like the shiatsu massage chair for my back, which are an expensive but worthwhile investment.

They are amazing for muscular problems, can run for hours while you sit at a desk, and some come with extra heat as an option. The few downsides of massage machines are that they can run your skin raw if used for too long and they have limited efficacy for deep joint issues.

These are all some of the non-pill helpful products I have learned about and used over the years. One of the valuable lessons I have also learned when it comes to using these products is that what may work for someone might not work for another person. The only way to truly know is by trial and error.

For some people, these remedies are good enough to keep the nagging pain of OA manageable. For others, like me, stronger alternative therapies are needed to keep the pain away.