

# ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DIET

A Patient Guide for Your Joints and Your Recovery

## YOUR DIET AT A GLANCE

|             |                                                                                                              |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EAT MORE    | Vegetables, fruit, fish, beans, whole grains, nuts, olive oil. <b>Color on every plate</b>                   |
| EAT LESS    | Sugar, refined carbs, fried food, processed meats, and ultra-processed snacks                                |
| PROTEIN     | At every meal. Before and after surgery, aim for <b>1.6–2.0 g per kg</b> of ideal body weight a day          |
| DRINKS      | Water first. Limit soda and sweet drinks. Less alcohol is better                                             |
| SUPPLEMENTS | Optional. <b>Stop fish oil, vitamin E, and herbal supplements (including turmeric) 5 days before surgery</b> |
| TOBACCO     | Quitting is one of the most powerful things you can do for your joints and your healing                      |

## Why Diet Matters for Your Joints

Chronic inflammation plays a role in many health problems, including arthritis, heart disease, and slow healing after surgery. What you eat can turn inflammation up or down. Studies show that people who eat more anti-inflammatory foods tend to have **less joint pain and better function**, and good nutrition supports recovery after surgery.

Diet is still an evolving area of medicine, and people respond differently: what bothers one person may not bother another. But the overall message is clear. Eating whole, nutrient-rich foods and cutting back on processed foods is one of the most effective things you can do for your joints and your recovery. A healthy diet also helps with **weight**, and losing even 5–10% of body weight takes real load off arthritic knees and hips.

### The gut-joint connection

Your gut holds trillions of bacteria that influence inflammation throughout your body, including your joints. A diet high in sugar and processed food shifts that balance in an unhealthy direction, while **fiber, fermented foods, and plant foods** feed the bacteria that make anti-inflammatory compounds. Researchers call this the "gut-joint axis." It is an active area of study, and early research links healthier gut bacteria to less joint pain.

## Key Principles

|                             |                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Eat whole foods</b>      | Build meals around vegetables, fruit, lean protein, whole grains, and healthy fats. The closer a food is to how it looked in nature, the better |
| <b>Choose healthy fats</b>  | <b>Omega-3s</b> (fish, walnuts, flaxseed) and <b>extra virgin olive oil</b> help lower inflammation. Make olive oil your everyday oil           |
| <b>Feed your gut</b>        | Fiber (vegetables, beans, oats) and fermented foods (yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi) support healthy gut bacteria                            |
| <b>Add color</b>            | Deeply colored produce (berries, leafy greens, tomatoes, peppers) is rich in antioxidants called polyphenols                                    |
| <b>Limit processed food</b> | Added sugar, refined flour, and heavily processed snacks drive inflammation. A long ingredient list is a warning sign                           |
| <b>Stay hydrated</b>        | Water and herbal tea. Limit sugary drinks and keep caffeine moderate                                                                            |

## Best Foods to Include

| Food                                 | Why it helps                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Salmon, sardines, trout, tuna</b> | Rich in omega-3 fats that lower inflammation. Aim for <b>two servings a week</b> . Salmon and sardines are high in omega-3s and low in mercury |
| <b>Berries and cherries</b>          | Packed with anthocyanins, plant compounds that lower inflammatory markers                                                                      |
| <b>Leafy greens and broccoli</b>     | Spinach, kale, broccoli: antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber                                                                                     |
| <b>Extra virgin olive oil</b>        | Contains <b>oleocanthal</b> , a natural compound with a mild ibuprofen-like effect. Use it as your main cooking and salad oil                  |
| <b>Nuts and seeds</b>                | Walnuts, almonds, flaxseed, chia: healthy fats, fiber, and protein                                                                             |
| <b>Avocados</b>                      | Healthy monounsaturated fats, potassium, and fiber                                                                                             |
| <b>Whole grains</b>                  | Oats, quinoa, brown rice: steady energy and fiber for gut health                                                                               |
| <b>Beans and lentils</b>             | Protein and fiber. A great meat substitute that feeds healthy gut bacteria                                                                     |
| <b>Turmeric and ginger</b>           | Curcumin (turmeric) and gingerols (ginger) have well-studied anti-inflammatory effects. Cook with them generously                              |
| <b>Fermented foods</b>               | Yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi: support a diverse gut microbiome                                                                            |
| <b>Green tea</b>                     | Rich in polyphenols (EGCG). Two to three cups a day is a good target                                                                           |
| <b>Dark chocolate (70%+)</b>         | Flavonoids with anti-inflammatory effects. A small square a day                                                                                |

## Foods to Limit

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Refined carbs</b>             | White bread, pastries, sugary cereal, and white pasta spike blood sugar, which promotes inflammation                                           |
| <b>Added sugar</b>               | Soda, candy, and desserts are major drivers. Sugar hides in packaged foods as high-fructose corn syrup, dextrose, and maltose, so check labels |
| <b>Fried and processed meats</b> | Fast food, chips, hot dogs, bacon, and deli meats                                                                                              |
| <b>Ultra-processed foods</b>     | Long ingredient lists with preservatives, additives, and artificial colors are linked to gut imbalance and higher inflammation                 |

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Fats</b>    | Avoid <b>trans fats</b> (partially hydrogenated oils, some margarines and shortenings). Use olive or avocado oil, and butter sparingly. Plain vegetable oils like canola and soybean are fine in moderation; the bigger problem is the fried and ultra-processed foods they often come in |
| <b>Alcohol</b> | Less is better. Heavy drinking raises inflammation and slows healing. Avoid alcohol while you are taking pain medicine after surgery                                                                                                                                                      |

## If You Are Having Surgery

Surgery triggers a natural inflammatory response, and your body needs extra fuel to heal. Start good habits **2–4 weeks before surgery** so you go in with your reserves full.

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Before surgery</b> | Eat more anti-inflammatory foods. Raise your protein toward <b>1.6–2.0 g per kg of ideal body weight a day</b> (about 130–165 g for a 180-pound ideal weight). Take <b>vitamin D</b> 2,000–5,000 IU a day. Stock your kitchen and freeze healthy meals for when you are less mobile                                                                   |
| <b>After surgery</b>  | <b>Protein at every meal</b> , continued for 4–6 weeks: it is the building block for tissue repair. Eat vitamin C foods (oranges, bell peppers, strawberries) to support collagen and wound healing; collagen peptides 10–20 g a day with vitamin C can help. Keep up the anti-inflammatory foods and drink plenty of water, at least 8 glasses a day |
| <b>Low appetite</b>   | Small, frequent high-protein snacks and a protein shake (whey is my first choice) make the target much easier                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

### Nutrition

What you eat has a direct effect on how well you heal. Start good nutrition before surgery and continue through your recovery. Our nutrition guide explains what to take and how much: [merrittsurgery.com/surgeries/nutritional-optimization](https://merrittsurgery.com/surgeries/nutritional-optimization)



Scan for the nutrition guide

## A Note on Supplements

Some supplements show modest benefits for inflammation and joint health. They are optional. Food comes first.

| Supplement                 | What to know                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Turmeric (curcumin)</b> | Anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving effects in multiple studies. Best absorbed with black pepper extract (piperine)                                                                                                        |
| <b>Fish oil (omega-3)</b>  | Can lower inflammatory markers. Choose a quality product with at least 1,000 mg combined EPA and DHA a day; around surgery I recommend 2–4 g a day (stop 5 days before)                                                     |
| <b>Vitamin D</b>           | Low levels are linked to more inflammation, poor bone healing, and worse surgical outcomes, and many people in the Pacific Northwest are low. I recommend 2,000–5,000 IU a day around surgery; check your level if possible |
| <b>Probiotics</b>          | May support gut health; the best strains and doses are still being studied                                                                                                                                                  |

**Before surgery**

**Stop fish oil, vitamin E, and herbal supplements (including turmeric) 5 days before surgery** because they can affect bleeding. Tell me and your primary care doctor about everything you take, since some supplements interact with medicines.

## Avoid Smoking and Tobacco

Tobacco and nicotine raise inflammation throughout the body. Smokers have more pain from orthopedic injuries, more complications after surgery, and slower healing of wounds, bone, and tendons. **If you smoke or vape, quitting is one of the most powerful things you can do** for your joints and your surgery. For free help, call the Washington State Quitline at **1-800-QUIT-NOW** (1-800-784-8669) or talk to your primary care doctor.

## Simple Meal Ideas

|                  |                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Breakfast</b> | Greek yogurt with blueberries, walnuts, and a little honey. Or oatmeal with chia seeds, banana, and cinnamon                                   |
| <b>Lunch</b>     | Big salad with greens, grilled salmon or chicken, avocado, tomatoes, and olive oil dressing. Or bean and vegetable soup with whole-grain bread |
| <b>Dinner</b>    | Baked salmon with roasted broccoli and quinoa. Or grilled chicken with sweet potato and spinach sautéed in garlic and olive oil                |
| <b>Snacks</b>    | A handful of almonds or walnuts, apple with almond butter, hummus with carrots and peppers, a small square of dark chocolate                   |

**The bottom line**

You don't need a perfect diet to make a difference. Small, steady changes add up: more vegetables, fish instead of fried food, water instead of soda. An anti-inflammatory diet is not a short-term fix. It is a way of eating that supports your joints, your recovery, and your health for years.

This guide is general education and does not replace personal medical or nutrition advice. If you have kidney disease or a special diet from another doctor, follow their guidance on protein.