



Your Pharmacy
...your neighbour

Health Really Matters™

GLUCOSAMINE

Information about one over-the-counter product that brings pain relief to some people.



Osteoarthritis is the most common form of more than 100 different types of arthritis. These types range from milder forms of the disease like tennis elbow (tendonitis) and bursitis to crippling forms like rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis is a breakdown of cartilage, which is a tough, slippery, elastic material that covers and protects the ends of our bones and acts like a cushion in the joint. When bits of cartilage break off, the result is inflammation, which causes pain and swelling in the joint between the bones.

This is a progressive disease in which the cartilage could gradually wear away in places and the bones may form bumps or "spurs" at their ends. As time passes, more cartilage can wear away entirely causing the bones to rub together and making the joints difficult to move. The main joints affected by this type of arthritis are the weight-bearing joints of the knees, feet, spine and hips although the joints of the hands and fingers can also be affected.

What is Glucosamine?

There are many products on pharmacy shelves that are classed as complementary therapy. One of the most common of these products is glucosamine, a natural product that is often a first choice of therapy when someone is diagnosed with osteoarthritis.

Glucosamine (and products combined with chondroitin) are two of the biggest selling supplements for osteoarthritis. Glucosamine occurs naturally in and around our joint cartilage. Glucosamine is thought to slow the deterioration of the cartilage thus reducing pain and stiffness. The results are not immediate. It may take up to three months before you see positive effects. But if after three months you haven't felt any benefits, then glucosamine probably will not work for you.

Glucosamine supplements are derived from the shells of shellfish like shrimp, crab or lobster. If you have a serious shellfish allergy, you may choose not to use glucosamine. However, most shellfish allergies are due to constituents in the flesh of the shellfish not the shells.

Incidentally, there are two forms of glucosamine available on the market. One is glucosamine sulphate and the other is glucosamine hydrochloride. It appears that the sulphate form works better.

The typical dosage of glucosamine is 500mg three times a day. No studies about the long-term use of glucosamine have been done. Some clinicians recommend giving glucosamine a one-month break after every three months of use. Evidently the effects can persist during this break in therapy.

Use of glucosamine in pregnancy appears safe. However, we suggest not introducing any new medication during pregnancy without consulting your physician. Diabetics should test their blood sugars a little more often after starting glucosamine to ensure there is no great variation in their sugar levels.

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INFORMATION ABOUT OSTEOARTHRITIS

- If you are experiencing persistent stiffness, pain and swelling around a joint that lasts longer than two weeks, see your doctor.
- The risk of osteoarthritis increases with age.
- Certain occupations may predispose you to osteoarthritis. Those doing jobs requiring a lot of squatting may develop the disease over the years.
- There seems to be a hereditary link. If other members of your family had arthritis, you have a greater risk of getting it.
- The exact cause of osteoarthritis is not known however being overweight increases your risk of developing the disease.
- Since the weight-bearing joints are often affected, losing weight will help put less stress on these joints, especially the knees and hips. Even losing as little as 10 lbs can help prevent osteoarthritis in your knees if you don't have the disease and reduce pain and discomfort in those who do have it.
- If you repeatedly injure a certain joint or overuse it a lot, you can damage the cartilage, which can lead to osteoarthritis.
- It used to be thought that osteoarthritis was due to normal "wear and tear". We now know that normal activity and exercise is good for arthritic joints. So if you have it, still try to include exercise into your daily routine.
- It is important that a correct diagnosis is established early. Most therapies work best when started early in the disease process.
- Note: It is important to keep your doctor informed when you take any non-prescribed medications. If you do try glucosamine, keep your doctor "in the loop".

DOES GLUCOSAMINE WORK?

As pharmacists we often are asked the question "Does glucosamine work"? Numerous clinical studies have been done on glucosamine and the results are quite mixed. In some cases, there was no difference between taking glucosamine and taking a placebo (sugar pill). In others, some people felt it worked very well for them. Because the side effect profile of glucosamine is quite good, it is worth a try if you are diagnosed with osteoarthritis and are experiencing mild to moderate pain. It is relatively inexpensive compared to some prescription medications and just may help with the pain and possibly give you an increase in your mobility.

Glucosamine interactions: Some evidence exists that glucosamine may interact with warfarin, an anti-clotting medication resulting in an increase in the effect of the warfarin. This is also true with chondroitin. A symptom of this interaction is an unusual or prolonged bruising or bleeding. If you take warfarin, it is a good idea to inform your doctor if you start taking glucosamine or chondroitin. The doctor can make adjustments on your warfarin dose if the lab results change significantly.

Glucosamine can be taken at the same time as NSAIDs. Since NSAIDs have a more immediate effect on pain and mobility, some people will take both for a couple of months then taper off the NSAID while continuing the glucosamine. NSAIDs certainly have more side effects than glucosamine and if the glucosamine works well enough, it may be useful to reduce the NSAID.

Glucosamine combined with other products: You will often find glucosamine combined with other products like chondroitin and MSM. There have been few reliable clinical studies about these products but there has been some positive feedback from some people who have tried them. If glucosamine alone doesn't bring the results you want, try it with chondroitin and/or MSM. Again, give it a three-month trial and if it doesn't work by then, it's not going to work at all.

SUMMARY:

Although the clinical evidence of the efficacy of glucosamine is inconclusive, it is worth a try. Talk to our Medicine Centre pharmacists about glucosamine and other methods to reduce the pain and discomfort of osteoarthritis.