

Glucosamine

What is Glucosamine?

Glucosamine is a food supplement that is advertised as being helpful for patients with osteoarthritis, a joint disease that often leads to cartilage loss. It is one of the components of glycosaminoglycans, which are found in the articular cartilage of the joints. Glucosamine is made naturally in the body in small amounts and it is thought that the ability of the body to do this decreases with age.

Glucosamine supplements are sold as either glucosamine sulphate or glucosamine hydrochloride. Glucosamine sulphate is the only formulation that has been scientifically tested. It is either produced synthetically or is made from the shells of shellfish. It is not found in any common foodstuffs.

It comes in various strengths from 400mg to 1500mg. Sometimes it is sold in combination with other food supplements such as Chondroitin or MSM (methylsulfonylmethane).

Does Glucosamine help?

Some of the advertising relies on unreliable evidence for its usefulness, but nowadays there is more scientific research being carried out which looks at its effectiveness in different situations. Some studies have been completed and others are still going on, and the results so far look promising. It appears that Glucosamine does have a mild anti-inflammatory effect in osteoarthritis and may help relieve pain for some people. Some studies also suggest it may help to slow progressive damage to the knee joints in osteoarthritis.

How much should be taken?

The evidence that is available seems to suggest that a dose of 1500mg per day will give a beneficial effect that is similar to that of anti-inflammatory drugs.

Are there any side effects?

Unwanted side effects seem to be rare, but more evidence is needed to confirm the long-term safety of its use. There have been some reports of relatively minor side effects such as nausea, gastric discomfort, diarrhoea or constipation and, very rarely, headache or rashes. In general however, glucosamine appears to be very safe. In order to minimise the risk of side effects it is recommended that glucosamine is taken with food.

What about the combination supplements?

There has been very little research using glucosamine and chondroitin. There may be some benefit in having the combination but more research is necessary to be certain of this.