

Defending Against Disease with an Anti-Inflammation Lifestyle

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Inflammation, once merely considered the body's healing response, is now the subject of close scrutiny as a key component of many diseases. Arthritis and inflammation have been linked for decades, but the inflammatory response is also taking center stage in heart disease, cancer, diabetes, asthma and Alzheimer's disease. Equally exciting is preliminary research showing a probably association of inflammation with diet, activity and other lifestyle choices.

Inflammation can be a good thing. When you get a cut, burn or bruise, the inflammatory response is the mechanism used by the body to combat injury. Problems occur, however, when the inflammatory response does not shut off and goes from being temporary, localized and protective to being chronic and harmful. Continuous inflammation can cause changes in cells, contributing to premature cell death and disease. While some factors associated with inflammation can't be altered, such as aging, many healthy lifestyle modifications, such as avoiding tobacco, will decrease inflammation.

Watch Your Weight and Stay Active

Consuming too many calories and being overweight, especially for those people carrying extra pounds around their midsection, leads to greater levels of inflammatory compounds. C-reactive protein (CRP) is a marker for inflammation. CRP can be easily measured with a simple blood test. Obese individuals tend to have higher levels of C-reactive protein (CRP). When excess weight is lost, CRP generally goes down.

Another theory explaining the perils of having excess fat cells is that this taxes the immune system because the body views your fat cells as "foreign invaders". To fight off the invaders, the body turns on the inflammatory response and keeps it on.

Engaging in regular exercise not only aids weight control and body-fat reduction, but also lowers CRP levels. Aim to do at least 30 minutes of continuous activity most days of the week.

Focus On Fat Type

Dietary fats can influence the degree of inflammation. Trans-fats, namely hydrogenated oils, some margarine brands, french fries and other fried foods are pro-inflammatory. In a Harvard study, trans-fatty acids are linked to greater inflammation in overweight women. Saturated fats found in red meats, full fat dairy foods, butter and poultry skin are contributors to chronic inflammation as well. Also, eating too many foods that are rich in omega-6 fatty acids (especially vegetable oils such as corn, safflower and cottonseed oils) appears to promote inflammation.

On the other hand, omega-3 fats exert anti-inflammatory effects. Diets with lower amounts of omega-3 fats result in less production of prostaglandins, substances which turn up inflammation. The best omega-3 sources are fish such as salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring and tuna as well as fish-oil supplements. Other omega-3 contributors include ground flax, flaxseed oil, walnuts and, to a limited degree, green leafy vegetables. Dietary monounsaturated fats (olive oil and canola oil) also dampen inflammation.

Eat More Unrefined Carbohydrates

A diet full of colorful fruits, vegetables and whole grains supplies an array of antioxidants. These antioxidant-rich carbohydrates act by squelching free radicals that may contribute to chronic inflammation. Conversely, a regular diet of refined carbohydrates or sugary foods result in free-radical formation. The carbs in sweets and desserts are usually low in antioxidants (the exception is dark chocolate) and often contain saturated and trans fats. They also can readily contribute to weight gain, and this includes dark chocolate.

Additional Anti-Inflammatory Advice

There is data suggesting that alcohol may exert an anti-inflammatory effect. In one study, individuals who consumed on to seven drinks a week had lower levels of CRP and interleukin 6 (IL-6), another marker of inflammation, compared to individuals who either never drank or drank more that eight drinks per week. Clearly more is not better; two drinks per day is the maximum and women should limit it to one per day.

Drinking other beverages such as coffee and tee (green especially) supplies an assortment of antioxidants too. Moreover, two seasonings - turmeric (found in curry) and ginger - have anti-inflammatory properties and are therefore beneficial. Lastly, not smoking, controlling blood pressure and getting adequate sleep all help to combat chronic inflammation.

The Bottom Line

Whether curbing chronic inflammation is the cure-all or cornerstone of disease risk reduction or not, embracing a healthy lifestyle as described above affords the best chance of thwarting or at least controlling a variety of chronic illnesses. Here are a few tasty recipes to launch your anti-inflammation lifestyle:

An Omega-3 Special

(240 calories/serving, makes one serving)

- 2 cups dark green salad mix plus other desired vegetables: tomatoes, green pepper, celery, carrots, radishes, mushrooms, or cucumbers
- 1/2 can (3 oz.) canned salmon or sardines
- 1 tbsp. vinaigrette dressing

Toss salad mix plus vegetables in medium size bowl. Add canned salmon or sardines along with dressing. Toss again and serve.

Broccoli and Black Bean Stir-Fry

(369 calories per 2-cup serving size, makes 4 servings)

- 6 to 8 fresh mushrooms
- 1 cup (185 g) long-grain brown rice
- 1 medium garlic
- 2 tsp. canola oil
- 1/2 tsp. honey
- 5 cups broccoli florets
- 1 15-ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- 2 tbsp. reduced-sodium soy sauce

Bring 2 cups of water to a boil over high heat; stir in rice. Reduce heat, cover and simmer until liquid has been absorbed and rice is tender to bite (about 20 minutes). Transfer to a rimmed platter and keep warm. Fluff occasionally with a fork.

Clean and slice fresh mushrooms. Separate garlic into cloves; then peel and thinly slice garlic cloves. Heat oil in a wide nonstick frying pan or wok over medium-high heat. When oil is hot, add garlic (to taste) and mushrooms; then stir-fry gently just until tinged with brown (about 2 minutes; do not scorch). Add water, 1 tablespoon at a time, if pan appears dry. Remove garlic and mushrooms from pan with a slotted spoon; place in bowl.

Add broccoli and 1/3 cup water to pan. Cover and cook until broccoli is almost tender (about 3 minutes). Uncover and stir-fry until liquid has evaporated. Add beans and stir-fry gently until heated through.

Remove pan from heat, and add mushroom mixture, soy sauce, sesame oil, and honey; mix gently but thoroughly. Spoon broccoli mixture over rice.