

Foods that Fight Inflammation

As we begin riding the upswing into spring, it's a good time to remind ourselves of the important adage that "food is the first medicine." And I would offer the idea that simple choices day after day can not only dig the hole but build the ladder that gives us a way up and out... RO

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Doctors are learning that one of the best ways to quell inflammation lies not in the medicine cabinet, but in the refrigerator.

Your immune system attacks anything in your body that it recognizes as foreign—such as an invading microbe, plant pollen, or chemical. The process is called inflammation. Intermittent bouts of inflammation directed at truly threatening invaders protect your health.

However, sometimes inflammation persists, day in and day out, even when you are not threatened by a foreign invader. That's when inflammation can become your enemy. Many major diseases that plague us—including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, depression, and Alzheimer's—have been linked to chronic inflammation.

One of the most powerful tools to combat inflammation comes not from the pharmacy, but from the grocery store. "Many experimental studies have shown that components of foods or beverages may have anti-inflammatory effects," says Dr. Frank Hu, professor of nutrition and epidemiology in the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Choose the right foods, and you may be able to reduce your risk of illness. Consistently pick the wrong ones, and you could accelerate the inflammatory disease process.

Inflammation-promoting foods

Not surprisingly, the same foods that contribute to inflammation are generally considered bad for our health, including sodas and refined carbohydrates, as well as red meat and processed meats.

"Some of the foods that have been associated with an increased risk for chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease are also associated with excess inflammation," Dr. Hu says. "It's not surprising, since inflammation is an important underlying mechanism for the development of these diseases."

Unhealthy foods also contribute to weight gain, which is itself a risk factor for inflammation. Yet in several studies, even after researchers took obesity into account, the link between foods and inflammation remained, which suggests weight gain isn't the sole driver. "Some of the food components or ingredients may have independent effects on inflammation over and above increased caloric intake," Dr. Hu says.

Anti-inflammation foods

On the flip side are foods and beverages that have been found to reduce the risk of inflammation, and with it, chronic disease, says Dr. Hu. He notes in particular fruits and vegetables such as blueberries, apples, and leafy greens that are high in natural antioxidants and polyphenols—protective compounds found in plants.

Studies have also associated nuts with reduced markers of inflammation and a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Coffee, which contains polyphenols and other anti-inflammatory compounds, may protect against inflammation, as well.

Anti-inflammatory eating

To reduce levels of inflammation, aim for an overall healthy diet. If you're looking for an eating plan that closely follows the tenets of anti-inflammatory eating, consider the Mediterranean diet, which is high in fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, fish, and healthy oils.

In addition to lowering inflammation, a more natural, less processed diet can have noticeable effects on your physical and emotional health. "A healthy diet is beneficial not only for reducing the risk of chronic diseases, but also for improving mood and overall quality of life," Dr. Hu says.

Foods that inflame

Try to avoid or limit these foods as much as possible:

refined carbohydrates, such as white bread and pastries

French fries and other fried foods

soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages

red meat (burgers, steaks) and processed meat (hot dogs, sausage)

margarine, shortening, and lard

Foods that combat inflammation

Include plenty of these anti-inflammatory foods in your diet:

tomatoes

olive oil

green leafy vegetables, such as spinach, kale, and collards

nuts like almonds and walnuts

fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, tuna, and sardines

fruits such as strawberries, blueberries, cherries, and oranges