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Trusted advice for a healthier life

What you eat can fuel or cool inflammation, a key driver of heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic conditions

The Family Health Guide

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Inflammation is an essential part of the body's healing system. Without it, injuries would fester and simple infections could be deadly. Too much of a good thing, though, is downright dangerous. Chronic low-grade inflammation is intimately involved in all stages of atherosclerosis, the process that leads to cholesterol-clogged arteries. This means that inflammation sets the stage for heart attacks, most strokes, peripheral artery disease, and even vascular dementia, a common cause of memory loss.

Inflammation doesn't happen on its own. It is the body's response to a host of modern irritations like smoking, lack of exercise, high-fat and high-calorie meals, and highly processed foods.

Medical researchers and pharmaceutical companies are hot on the trail of inflammation-busting drugs. Don't bother waiting - they are a long way off, are bound to be expensive, and will almost certainly have side effects. Instead, you can turn to simple tools that ease inflammation. We'll focus on diet here, but don't forget about avoiding cigarette smoke (yours or someone else's), exercising, watching your weight, and taking care of your teeth.

What is inflammation?

Inflammation's aim is to defend the body against bacteria, viruses, and other foreign invaders, to remove debris, and to help repair damaged tissue. Inside arteries, inflammation helps kick off atherosclerosis and keeps the process smoldering. It even influences the formation of artery-blocking clots, the ultimate cause of heart attacks and many strokes.

Simple changes

What you eat may fan the fires of inflammation. Here are some suggestions:

Get an oil change. Swap saturated and trans fats for olive oil, which has potent anti-inflammatory properties, or polyunsaturated fats, especially omega-3 fats from fish.

Don't be so refined. The bolus of blood sugar that accompanies a meal or snack of highly refined carbohydrates (white bread, white rice, French fries, sugar-laden soda, etc.) increases levels of inflammatory messengers called cytokines. Eating whole-grain bread, brown rice, and other whole grains smooths out the after-meal rise in blood sugar and insulin, and dampens cytokine production.

Promote produce. The more fruits and vegetables you eat, the lower the burden of inflammation. Why? They contain hundreds, perhaps thousands, of substances that squelch inflammation-rousing free radicals; some act as direct anti-inflammatory agents.

Go nuts. Adding walnuts, peanuts, almonds, and other nuts and seeds to your snacks and meals is another tasty way to ease inflammation.

Cocoa lovers rejoice? In laboratory studies, cocoa and dark chocolate slow the production of signaling molecules involved in inflammation. The trick is to get them without too much sugar and fat.

Alcohol in moderation. A drink a day seems to lower levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), a powerful signal of inflammation. Too much alcohol has the opposite effect on CRP.

Spice it up. Herbs and spices such as turmeric, ginger, garlic, basil, pepper, and many others have anti-inflammatory properties.

Putting it all together

If you are a do-it-yourselfer, pick and choose foods that ease inflammation and eat them instead of those that promote it. If you'd rather follow a plan, the so-called Mediterranean diet encompasses many inflammation-fighting foods. So does the Healthy Eating Pyramid, developed by Dr. Walter Willett and his colleagues at the Harvard School of Public Health.

If you adopt an anti-inflammatory diet, you probably won't see or feel any different. Angina won't suddenly disappear or heart failure reverse itself. But you will be doing your heart, arteries, and the rest of you a huge favor that will pay off in many ways.

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