

What to do when inflammation stays around too long

By Teddi Nicolaus

If you've spent any time online, you've probably seen ads for supplements or expensive diets to get rid of "inflammation." But before you hit that "buy" button, let's pause and see what the science says.

The reality is that inflammation in humans is both a good and bad thing, according to Thaddeus Stappenbeck, MD, PhD. And you don't want it to go away altogether.

"The inflammatory system is what responds to emergencies in your body," says Stappenbeck, who is chair of inflammation and immunity at Cleveland Clinic's Lerner Research Institute.

Let's say you cut your finger chopping onions. Your immune system will spring into action, sending helpful cells to attack bacteria and prep the injury for healing. This short-lived process is called "acute" inflammation.

Acute inflammation is easy to spot. For example, you might see redness and swelling around a cut on your finger, which is good, as it's a sign of healing.

But there's another type of inflammation that's not so good. It's called "chronic inflammation." It occurs when your body keeps on sending those fighter cells, even when you're not injured or sick.

Chronic inflammation is complicated. It can come from a range of things, such as poor lifestyle habits or exposure to pollution. It can also be caused by disorders in which your body mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissues, such as lupus, Crohn's disease or multiple sclerosis.



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Unlike our friend acute inflammation, chronic inflammation comes on gradually and can last for years. The processes that cause it can occur deep in our internal organs, so it isn't easy to spot, Stappenbeck says.

People who have chronic inflammation can feel fatigued, lose their appetite, have joint pain and gastrointestinal issues, and a host of other ailments. That will likely prompt them to visit the doctor, "who will start investigating what's going on in various organs to figure out what's happening," Stappenbeck says.

If you have inflammation for a really long time, it can lead to things like Type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease. You probably know someone who has one or more of those conditions. But that doesn't mean you should open your wallet to one of those so-called miracle cures. Instead, take a look at your lifestyle.

Chronic stress can harm your immune system, leading to chronic inflammation, so you should find ways to reduce stress every day. Whether it's taking timeouts, practicing meditation or yoga, or switching jobs, do what it takes to get the stress monster off your back. It's also crucial to get adequate, regular sleep.

There's also plenty of sound scientific research showing that nutrients can make a difference in preventing and reducing chronic inflammation. But don't go running to the supplement aisle. Eating real food is the best way to get benefits.

Foods that have been shown to reduce inflammation include fatty fish such as

salmon and sardines, green tea, coffee, whole grains, leafy green vegetables and fruit, according to Edward Giovannucci, MD, MPH, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

"What tends to increase inflammation are highly processed foods that are high in sugar, refined carbohydrates and saturated fat," Giovannucci says.

Processed foods cause inflammation by altering the helpful bacteria that live in our guts. Highly processed foods include potato chips, sugary drinks, cereals, frozen pizzas

and prepared frozen entrees.

Alcohol — and in particular, hard liquor — can also worsen chronic inflammation. So it's good to eliminate or cut back on it.

Point your knife and fork toward the Mediterranean

If you're looking for a solid, well-researched anti-inflammatory eating plan, consider the Mediterranean diet. Inspired by people living near the Mediterranean Sea, the diet has been linked to numerous health benefits. People who want to follow it should:

- ◆ Limit foods with saturated fat, like red meats, eggs and cheese.
- ◆ Eat more vegetables, fruits, whole grains and fish. Add in more nuts and seeds.
- ◆ Bring on the legumes! Include chickpeas, lentils, beans and peas on a regular basis.
- ◆ Swap out usual dietary fats with extra-virgin olive oil.

As always, the bottom line when making any big health change is to talk to your health care team. Together, you can come up with an eating and lifestyle plan that fits your own needs.



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