

Putting Out the Fire: Natural Approaches to Inflammation

What is inflammation?

The word inflammation comes from the Latin **inflammatio**, which means “to set on fire.” It is our body’s natural protective response to injury or infection with the goal to remove the cause of the injury and initiate the process of tissue healing. The four main signs of inflammation are redness, heat, swelling and pain. You can recognize the role inflammation plays in a variety of diseases as their names often end with “-itis,” the suffix denoting inflammation. So, colitis is inflammation of the intestines; tonsillitis, of the tonsils, and so on.

Different kinds of inflammation

We all recognize and know acute inflammation. We step the wrong way and twist an ankle causing pain, swelling and redness or bruising. Basic treatment for acute inflammation is based on four steps which go under the acronym RICE—rest, ice, compression, elevation. We may also take anti-inflammatory medicines such as aspirin or ibuprofen, and in severe cases, use steroids such as cortisone or prednisone. We may rub arnica

gel on the area.

What we don’t often recognize is chronic inflammation which has subtle signs and symptoms, may go undetected for decades and is a causative or contributing factor to most of the chronic, degenerative and life-threatening diseases we face. For example, together rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis affect over 28 million Americans. Chronic inflammation in the heart and circulatory system is increasingly being recognized as a major factor in heart attacks, stroke and blood vessel disease, the major causes of death in both men and women. Low grade chronic infections, especially viral ones, have strong associations with increased cancer risks due to inflammation. Chronic inflammation is also a major component of allergies and asthma, bowel diseases, skin conditions and a host of others.

If the signs are subtle, how do I know if I have chronic inflammation?

Perhaps you’ve been diagnosed with a chronic condition where inflammation plays a role, or you have a family history of diseases

such as heart disease or arthritis. Do you have any risk factors such as smoking, eating a high animal fat or high sugar diet, or not get enough exercise? There are lab tests that check for signs of inflammation. Immune system sensitivity tests can detect food and environmental allergens. C-Reactive Protein, or CRP, is becoming a common screening test for cardiovascular disease risk. Other tests are useful for diagnosing and monitoring specific inflammatory diseases.

If inflammation is a natural and protective response, why should we treat it?

When the acute inflammatory response is manageable, I believe no anti-inflammatory treatment is necessary. Many of the approaches I use in practice to manage acute, mild inflammation involve pain reduction, circulatory improvement and nutritional support to injured areas to help inflammation do its job as nature intended. But sometimes the acute inflammatory response is too great, and measures to reduce inflammation prevent long-term problems.

Chronic inflammation is a different

matter. Since it is insidious by nature, measures to reduce inflammation over time can pay off with improved vitality and reduced disease risk in the long run. Prevention and effective treatment is important in managing chronic inflammation and reducing the risk of chronic disease.

So, how can I reduce my risk of chronic inflammation?

Pay attention to lifestyle factors—

quit smoking, eat a healthy diet, get enough exercise and rest. Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and be moderate (see sidebar). The types of fats and oils we eat can either promote or reduce inflammation; fish and flax are good anti-inflammatory fats, while dairy and saturated fats tend to be pro-inflammatory. Spices such as turmeric and ginger have potent anti-inflammatory effects, as do bromelain and papain, enzymes found in pineapple and papaya. Minimize exposure to allergens or reactive foods. If you have a chronic

viral illness, support your immune system and manage it as effectively as possible. If you have risk factors or chronic illness, screening tests can help you understand current levels of inflammation and associated risk.

Finally, your naturopathic doctor can work with you to develop an individualized preventive strategy aimed at prevention and management of both acute and chronic inflammation and to lower your risk of chronic illness.

by Carl Hangee-Bauer, ND, LAc

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Anti-Inflammatory Diet

Emphasize brightly colored fruits and vegetables (packed with antioxidants), whole grains and lean proteins (for stable blood sugar) and healthy fats (for omega-3 anti-inflammatory oils). Avoid junk food, sugar, white flour, fried foods, processed meats, high fat animal products and nightshade vegetables (tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants and peppers). Choose organic, and select foods from the list below on a regular basis.

Vegetables: Dark leafy greens, crucifers (broccoli and cabbage family), carrots, beets, squash, onions, garlic and sea vegetables

Fruits: Dark berries, peaches, nectarines, oranges, grapefruit, red grapes, plums, pomegranates, cherries, apples and pears

Whole Grains: Brown rice, quinoa, buckwheat, oats, barley,

amaranth, millet, teff

Lean Proteins: Black beans, adzuki beans, chickpeas, soy, black-eyed peas, lentils, skinless free-range chicken or turkey, low fat yogurt

Healthy Fats: Wild Alaskan salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring, omega-3 enriched eggs, extra virgin olive oil or expeller-pressed canola oil for cooking, avocados, nuts (walnuts) and seeds (ground flaxseed)

Herbs and Spices: Turmeric, ginger, garlic, chili peppers, basil, cinnamon, rosemary, thyme

Beverages: Purified water, green tea, rooibos tea, up to 1-2 glasses red wine

Treats: Sparing use of dark chocolate (at least 70%) and unsweetened dried fruit

by Amy Day, ND