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Understanding Inflammation & Its Impact

We all have experienced inflammation at some point in our lives. Simply put, inflammation is a result of the body's immune response to a stimulus that may be harmful. For instance, an insect sting, a cut on the finger or a sprained ankle will cause inflammation as the body works to repair the damaged tissue.

These cases represent examples of acute or short-term, inflammation, which promotes healing and typically resolves in a matter of days once the immune system has done its job.

Symptoms of acute or short-term inflammation:

- Swelling
- Redness
- Pain
- Heat at the site



While acute inflammation is an important immune response, **chronic inflammation** can be more problematic as it can last for months or years. Chronic inflammation appears to be caused by a variety of factors. The immune response may fail to eliminate a problem completely, or inflammation stays active even after the infection or injury has been resolved. Autoimmune diseases, where the body's immune system fights against its own cells, also cause chronic inflammation that affects joints, the digestive system, skin, and more.

An increasing body of research shows that this long-term, low-level inflammation appears to play a significant role in several chronic diseases that include:

- Type 2 Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Alzheimer's disease
- Depression



Ways to reduce chronic or long-term inflammation:

The best advice for reducing inflammation and associated risks is the same lifestyle advice recommended for good health overall:

- Focus on nutritious food choices
- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Exercise regularly
- Quit smoking or using any form of tobacco

Nutrition's Positive Effect on Reducing Chronic Inflammation

One of the most powerful tools to combat inflammation is choosing the right foods. Consistently pick the wrong foods, and you could accelerate the inflammatory disease process.

To reduce levels of inflammation, aim for an overall healthy diet.

What does that look like?

- Aim for variety.
- Include as much fresh food as possible.
- Minimize your consumption of processed foods and fast food.
- Eat an abundance of fruits and vegetables



More specifically, 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
- Strawberries, blueberries, cherries, apples and oranges

Fruits and vegetables such as blueberries, apples, and leafy greens are high in natural antioxidants and polyphenols – protective compounds found in plants which help to reduce inflammation. 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.

Try to avoid or limit these foods as much as possible as they contribute to inflammation:

- 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

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.

A more natural, less processed diet is beneficial not only for reducing the risk of inflammation, but also for improving mood and overall quality of life.