

Your big new threat: Inflammation

Chronic swelling can prompt a host of diseases, even heart attacks. Here are eight ways you can reduce your risk.

Did you know inflammation is a bigger threat to your heart than cholesterol? The risk of heart attack jumped 300% in women with high blood vessel inflammation, but only 40% in women with high bad-type LDL cholesterol, according to new Harvard research. Men with the worst inflammation had three times the odds of dropping dead from a heart attack as men with the least inflammation.

Inflammation is characterized by pain, redness and swelling. If it persists, it's called "chronic" inflammation. Besides its well-known role in arthritis, chronic inflammation is a newly recognized factor in heart disease, strokes, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, cancer and asthma.

Here's the latest research on how to use diet to reduce inflammation throughout the body.

Eat fish oil. Omega-3 fatty acids in fish suppress the inflammatory agents that often are unleashed in the body by bad omega-6 fats such as corn and soybean oils. Fish oil counters inflammation in asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and depression, says Artemis Simopoulos, M.D., director of the Center for Genetics, Nutrition and Health and an authority on fish oil. Her advice: Avoid corn oil and eat fatty fish such as salmon, tuna and mackerel two or three times a week.

Consider alcohol. Drinking alcohol reduces inflammation, which may be one reason moderate drinkers have less heart disease. In a new study at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, non-drinkers showed one-third more inflammation than low to moderate drinkers.

Lose weight. Overweight people usually have high inflammation. As pounds disappear, inflammation subsides. In obese women who lost an average of 39 pounds, inflammation levels dropped 32%, University of Vermont research found.

Reduce blood sugar. Foods that spike blood sugar spur inflammation. In new research at Harvard, women who ate foods with the highest glycemic load had nearly twice as much inflammation. Such foods include white potatoes, white rice, white bread, sugar and highly processed cereals.

Watch your protein. High-protein diets boost inflammation, found the Fleming Heart and Health Institute in Omaha. In people on a high-protein diet for a year, blood vessel inflammation jumped 62% and coronary artery disease worsened.

Get lots of vitamins C and E. These antioxidants suppress inflammation. In Belgian research, people with the lowest vitamin C levels had the worst inflammation and peripheral (leg) artery disease. And inflammation dropped 30% to 50% in normal and diabetic people given 1,200 IU of vitamin E daily in studies at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

Don't cook on high heat. Grilling, broiling and frying meat and poultry create damaged proteins called AGEs (advanced glycosylation end products) that trigger inflammation. In diabetics who ate a high AGE-inducing diet, inflammation jumped 35%; it dropped 20% in those on low AGE-inducing diets, finds research at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. To reduce AGEs, poach or boil chicken, and eat more fish. Broiled fish has about one-fourth the AGEs of broiled steak or chicken. Fruits and vegetables are low in AGEs; cheeses are high in them.

Eat other foods that help subdue inflammation, such as ginger, curry powder, olive oil, grapes, garlic, celery, blueberries and tea.

Contact Contributing Editor Jean Carper, an authority on nutrition, at jeancarper.com. Sign up for her free quarterly newsletter: Call 800-627-9721 or visit stopagingnow.com.

What's your inflammation level?

Get a blood test that measures C-reactive protein (CRP), a marker for blood vessel inflammation. The higher your CRP, the greater your inflammatory activity.