

QUICK-START GUIDE TO AN ANTI-INFLAMMATION DIET

*There are no complicated rules to follow.
Just be mindful of general dos and don'ts.*

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Chronic inflammation — a state of persistent activation of the immune system — is an important part of many diseases, and diet is a big contributor to inflammation. It would make sense, then, to follow what's becoming known as the "anti-inflammation diet." Just one problem: "There isn't 'one' diet, although many people love to throw that term around. The diet in general is almost as much about what you don't eat as what you do eat," says Eric Rimm, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

For a quick start, let's boil it down to some dos and don'ts.

DON'T EAT THESE

Stay away from "ultra-processed" foods, which include just about anything that comes in a package — like microwaveable dinners, hot dogs, chicken nuggets, dehydrated soups, baked goods, sugary cereals, processed meats, biscuits, and sauces.

These foods have little nutritional value. Worse, they're high in salt, added sugars (which can spike your blood sugar), and saturated fat (which can increase your "bad" LDL cholesterol). All of these ingredients are associated with promoting inflammation in the body. "The biggest offender is anything with added sweeteners, whether that means cane sugar or any compounds used to add sweetness," Rimm says.

A report published in December 2019 in *Nature Medicine* notes that sugars, grains, and extra salt in ultra-processed foods can change the bacteria in your gut, damage the gut's lining, and switch on inflammatory genes in cells. Other studies have linked ultra-processed foods to shorter life spans, cancer, heart disease, heart attacks, strokes, and diabetes.

Inflammation-promoting foods include white breads, cereals, white pasta, and other products made with refined flours, as well as white rice. "White flour leads directly to a pro-inflammatory state," Rimm says.

Other offenders include soda, juices, cookies and other baked goods, butter, cheese, ice cream, coconut products, candy, salad dressings, jarred tomato sauces, and processed and cured meats.

DO EAT THESE

To fight inflammation, go for whole, unprocessed foods with no added sugar: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (beans, lentils), fish, poultry, nuts, seeds, a little bit of low-fat dairy, and olive oil. "To these, many people add herbs and spices like cinnamon, ginger, and turmeric. There are a few studies that suggest modest benefits," Rimm says.

How do they help? "It's believed that antioxidants in brightly colored fruits and vegetables [cooked tomatoes, carrots, squash, and broccoli] may lessen the effect of free radicals, which damage cells," says Liz Moore, a registered dietitian at Harvard-affiliated Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

Other food components that may help fight inflammation include

- fiber found in fruits, vegetables, and especially legumes and whole grains such as barley, oats, and bran
- omega-3 fatty acids found in fish (such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, tuna), vegetable oils (flaxseed and canola), walnuts, flaxseeds, and leafy green vegetables (spinach and kale)
- polyphenols (plant chemicals) found in berries, dark chocolate, tea, apples, citrus, onions, soybeans, and coffee
- unsaturated fats found in almonds, pecans, walnuts, flaxseeds, pumpkin and sesame seeds, and plant oils (olive, peanut, canola).

The evidence that trying to minimize inflammation through dietary changes reduces the risk of diseases "is strongest for arthritis, gastrointestinal and heart health, and possibly auto-immune diseases," Moore says.

MAKING THE SHIFT

Don't try to suddenly switch to a new eating style. "Start by slowly making changes so that these become more of a lifestyle shift rather than 'going on a diet,'" Moore says. "Try to eat fewer foods that come from packages and more that come from the ground."

Apply that approach to each meal. For breakfast, you might have a fruit smoothie or oatmeal with a few berries; for lunch, a salad of dark leafy greens with colorful vegetables topped with beans, nuts, and seeds; for dinner, a lean protein and more colorful vegetables, with fruit for dessert. The more color and variety you add to a meal, the more natural inflammation-fighting compounds you'll consume.

If you're more comfortable following a particular diet plan, consider a Mediterranean diet or the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet; they follow lots of the dos and don'ts we've outlined.

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