

Diet and Inflammation

Over the past two months I've noticed way too many articles on the topic of diet and inflammation. So this has compelled me to write up a quick article to give you some background on inflammation and clear the air on the real impact of diet and inflammation.

To start, when our bodies identify something as foreign or when we undergo some type of trauma the body reacts with an immune response. This immune response is designed to fight the foreign invader or fix the trauma to bring the body back to equilibrium. So an example of this is if you get the flu, you will get all the symptoms of flu including aches and pain, fever, fatigue and generally feeling like crap. During this time the body is fighting an infection and a range of molecules are released to fight this infection which in turn cause systemic inflammation. Now once the infection has run its course, the inflammation goes away and your body returns to normal.

Now what we know is diet can also have a big impact on inflammation and people with heart disease, type II diabetes and some types of cancer have high blood levels of markers of inflammation. These conditions are outside normal metabolism, so the body sends out an immune response to try and heal itself.

Self-proclaimed nutrition experts or those who follow them commonly claim grains, dairy and processed foods are the root cause of inflammation in our body and the best way to fight inflammation is to eliminate them from our diet.

These suggestions are based on the belief that our bodies are not designed to digest these foods so they must cause inflammation. Unfortunately this is ill-informed advice and not backed up with enough evidence.

So what do we know so far about diet and inflammation? Well it turns out to be quite a lot. Diets which include carbohydrates, which absorb into the blood stream quickly, result in increased inflammation. But we also know diets high in fibre help reduce inflammation. Diets high in saturated fats and trans fats have also been found to increase inflammation but the opposite occurs for diets with foods rich in mono and poly unsaturated fats (the omega 3 type). We also know a single meal high in saturated fat will increase inflammation straight after the meal. To complicate things further, certain foods will cause some inflammatory markers to rise and not others.

What needs to be remembered is a one off meal high in inflammatory foods (saturated fat, fast absorbing carbs and low in fibre) is unlikely to do any immediate real damage. The problem is the ongoing, chronic, unhealthy eating patterns which will end up doing the real damage.

The Mediterranean diet is the most widely studied diet in this area and has been shown to result in lower levels of inflammation. This diet is high in whole grains, fish, fruit and green vegetables and has moderate alcohol (red wine) intake and includes olive oil. It is also low in red meat and butter.

There are also a range of other nutrients which have a strong anti-inflammatory effect and include the herb turmeric, the nutrients quercetin, luteolin and genistein, which are found in fruit, vegetables and soybeans and the vitamins A, B-6, C, D and E.

So how does all this relate to the food you eat every day? Use the below points as a guide:

- Eat a variety of fruits including citrus, berries, pome and stone fruits — apples, pears, oranges grapefruit, cherries, bananas, raspberries, grapes and passionfruit
- Go big on a variety of vegetables with plenty of colour. If possible, have a good serve of these for both lunch (like a salad) and dinner and include broccoli, bok choy, cabbages, cauliflower, carrots, beetroot, onions, shallots, garlic, kidney beans, soybeans, chickpeas, lentils, split peas, tofu, avocado, capsicum, eggplant and mushrooms.

There is too much variety.

- Have three serves of whole grains each day. This includes wholemeal and wholegrain breads, high fibre (wholegrain) oats, porridge, muesli for breakfast and rice, barley, corn, polenta, triticale, rye and quinoa for other meals.
- Try and have fish regularly and go for salmon, sardines, trout or barramundi. Reduce your red meat (beef, lamb, pork) intake to around 500g of cooked meat each week. Choose lean poultry and try and have one meat free day each week.
- If you add oil to cooking or meals use olive oil.
- Minimise the intake of highly processed foods, particularly the meat variety and those foods high in salt, sugar and fat, especially saturated and trans fats.

Written by Julian Everett. Julian is the co-owner of Body Basics and has over 25 years fitness, health and nutrition industry experience. He is a qualified personal trainer, strength and conditioning coach and dietitian. If you are interested in a nutrition consultation please contact reception.