

# Anti-Inflammatory Living

By Rachel Abrams, M.D.

You probably don't spend much time thinking about inflammation in your body, but inflammation is a buzz-word in the medical community these days because it is such an important part of health and wellness. We generally think of inflammation as painful redness or swelling around injuries or joints, but the process of inflammation is used throughout the body to fight off harmful microorganisms. It is a vital process, but unfortunately, too much inflammation actually damages the body. Think of the good scientist, Dr. David Banner, when he transforms into the incredible Hulk, with collateral damage to buildings and healthy tissue everywhere. In high levels, inflammation is the root cause of many of the top killers today: heart disease, cancer, stroke, emphysema, asthma, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and inflammatory bowel disease. Inflammation is responsible for the pain of arthritis and other musculoskeletal injuries and is the active force behind diseases where the immune system attacks the body, such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus or Hashimoto's thyroid disease. Now, why is this? It seems our modern lifestyle, in addition to inflaming the populace (e.g. road rage, soccer fans gone awry), causes inflammation inside the body through what we eat, how we live and, yes, what we feel.

There are medications available to reduce pain and inflammation, and sometimes, they are just what the doctor ordered, for example, steroids for an acute asthma attack or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, NSAID's (think ibuprofen or naprosyn), for an acute attack of gouty arthritis. However, oral steroids over the long term can be quite dangerous and even our over-the-counter ibuprofen or naprosyn, not to mention prescription Celebrex, taken regularly can cause kidney failure, ulcers, *increase* the likelihood of heart attack and in a recent study, actually *prolong* the amount of time it takes to recover from an injury. As a treating physician, I prescribe these medications, but, as with any medication, I like to use natural means of treatment first in order to minimize the amount of medication needed, if any. In the case of inflammation, from whatever cause, we have LOTS of options!

Many integrative physicians point out that the most powerful natural anti-inflammatory agent we have is—my favorite—SLEEP! That's right, just by getting your Z's you are reducing chronic pain, arthritis and cardiovascular risk. A new 5 year study found that middle-aged people who got just one more hour of sleep a night than their peers were one-third less likely to have increased calcium deposits in their arteries—the kind that lead to “hardening of the arteries” and more heart attacks, strokes, and Alzheimer's disease. Sleep is vital to our health and happiness. If you are missing sleep in your life, look at my recent blog “Sleepless in Santa Cruz” for healthy tips on falling and staying asleep.

Just as important as the calming effects of sleep on your inflammatory and immune system, is the mood that you live within while awake. As one might suspect, if you are angry or aggressive in the outside world, your immune system becomes “inflamed” as

well, getting ready to fight off an enemy or protect a potential injury. Any kind of relaxing, meditative activity can help, such as regular exercise (especially if it is enjoyable!), tai chi and qi gong (Chinese martial arts known to reduce blood pressure and decrease the pain of arthritis), yoga, prayer, or meditation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, everything you put into your mouth sends a chemical signal to your body and can influence the inflammatory process. Red meat, high fat dairy products, hydrogenated oils, and all deep fried foods increase inflammation in the body. So that burger, fries and milk shake are probably not the best choices if you suffer from any inflammatory conditions.

Foods high in anti-oxidants, which can be found in plenty at your farmer's market, help decrease the inflammatory process of "oxidation" and protect your tissues. Look for yellow, orange and red vegetables, such as peppers, carrots and winter squash. Dark colored fruits, such as berries, and citrus fruits are also powerful anti-oxidants and are packed with many other vitamins as well. Dark leafy greens (spinach, romaine lettuce, chard and kale) are some of the most nutritious foods you can eat and are powerfully anti-inflammatory, as are onions and garlic, which are a wonderful accompaniment to your greens. People don't realize that many common spices have powerful anti-inflammatory compounds as well, especially ginger, rosemary, turmeric (the dark yellow-orange Indian spice, also called curcumin), oregano, cayenne, clove, and nutmeg. To accompany your meal, both black and green teas have strong anti-oxidant action and there are numerous studies linking the consumption of green tea to protection from all cancers.

Most of you have probably heard of the health benefits of cold-water fish and fish oil. Research on fish oil began because the Inuit Eskimos, who eat large quantities of fish, have extremely low rates of heart disease and heart attacks. This is because fish is one of the richest sources of omega-3 fatty acids, which are some of the most potent and well-researched anti-inflammatory compounds available. Omega-3's lower triglycerides; prevent and treat depression; decrease the pain of arthritis, menstrual cramping and other muscle aches; improve asthma, eczema and allergies; help menopausal symptoms and prevent heart attacks. The safest sources are good quality fish oils, wild Alaskan salmon, and smaller fish rich in oils such as sardines, herring or mackerel. Flax seed and flax seed oil are rich in omega-3's as well, but must be kept cold or at room temperature to retain their healing properties. Grinding them and adding to smoothies or using flax oil 3:1 in salad dressing is a wonderful way to get your omega-3's. Walnuts are also a rich source of omega 3's, as are leafy green vegetables, making salad with summer veggies and fruits, walnuts, and a vinaigrette with olive and flax oils a delicious anti-inflammatory contribution to your summer table.

So sleep long and well, breathe deeply and then get out to your neighborhood farmer's market so that you can prepare yourself an anti-inflammatory, life-giving feast! Eat well, live well and be well.

Blessings!  
Rachel

