
Feeling unwell? Inflammation might be the problem

Martina Gallivan, a nutritionist and director of RK Cardiology Healthy Living Ltd, takes a closer look at inflammation and the impact it has on the human body.

We are familiar with the effects of inflammation when the body is wounded. This is because when it is infected it then becomes inflamed. Typical symptoms include swelling, pain, redness, heat, and possibly loss of function. But did you know also that inflammation can be the cause of many illnesses?

One example is if somebody is overweight, inflammation becomes a continuous cycle. This weakens the immune system because the body is continuously trying to protect itself, and this may develop into chronic inflammation and possibly manifest into chronic disease. Obesity can lead to inflammation because fat cells can secrete chemicals such as C-reactive protein or Interleukin 6 which both promote inflammation.

Fundamentally, chronic inflammation can occur through poor dietary and lifestyle choices. The types of foods we eat can create either pro-inflammatory or anti-inflammatory responses within the body, sugar being the biggest culprit. Lack of exercise and excessive stress are also possible triggers for inflammation.

The foods we consume are responsible for delivering nutrients, that's where our energy comes from. Essential nutrients locked within food components are critical for human health. And although we have the best of intentions to keep ourselves healthy, what does that really mean?

The majority of people whom I see in clinic daily are convinced they actually do eat well. However, many suffer from chronic illness caused by their dietary intake. Also, healthy foods which are highly nutritious can suddenly become unhealthy if consumed in an incorrect quantity. Furthermore, some foods sold in supermarkets which purport to be healthy are in fact otherwise, due to their high preservative content.

This is all very confusing for the consumer in general and certainly many of us don't have time to read labels which can be time consuming not to mention tedious.

Nevertheless, our wish to shy away from rather than confront health is precisely why we are climbing higher on the obesity scale according to figures published by the World Health Organisation. I believe this could be a critical factor as to why our hospitals are continuously overcrowded.

To prevent this catastrophe escalating further, isn't it time for us as a nation to take responsibility for our own personal health?

Many common illnesses are associated with inflammation. These include digestive issues, skin complaints, auto immune conditions, heart disease and diabetes. In addition to this there is evidence to suggest some behavioural changes, specifically depression and anxiety related disorders are linked to inflammation. It is also likely that neuroinflammation exacerbates the neurodegenerative disorder Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia.

If you are identifying with this information and wondering how you can begin to adjust your life pattern there are a number of things you can do to start the process of change.

Nutritional science is a fascinating area to explore and it is important for us to at least be aware of the chemical compounds contained within the foods we consume. Understanding the basics will assist your future choices in terms of health.

Nutrients in foods provide us with nourishment. Essential nutrients (which cannot be synthesised by the body but are obtained from foods) are essential for sustenance and critically are the building blocks of life. These include proteins, carbohydrates and fats. I would also include essential vitamins, minerals and of course water.

To break this down further my advice is to vary your dietary intake. This is one way to ensure you consume a wide variety of foods and in doing so boost your chances to improve your health.

For example, proteins such as meats, poultry, seafood, eggs, cheese and milk provide us with essential amino acids. Non animal proteins or plant proteins such as legumes, nuts and seeds, tofu, tempeh and edamame are also highly nutritious without digesting animal fats. Eat a varied selection to obtain maximum nutrition and keep your protein as lean as possible preferably using organic products.

Carbohydrates are critical for health and are our main source of energy. Found in bread, pasta, rice, potatoes and cereals. Where possible use wholegrain products and vary dietary intake.

Fat or lipids are the third macronutrient found in foods like butter, oils, avocado, and also nuts and seeds. Essential fatty acids (essential for health) are found in fish, nuts and seeds. Lots of people, including myself take an Omega 3 supplement. There is a plethora of clinical studies demonstrating the positive effects of Omega 3 on the body, particularly for cardiovascular disease risk.

Fresh fruit and vegetables. These are full of vitamins and fibre but also antioxidants and phytonutrients. Frozen varieties are just as good because nutrients are locked from within.

Try to avoid processed foods. Processed meats, luncheon meats, sausages, salami etc... and also refined foods like refined white rice and pasta. Limit your intake of cakes, biscuits and other types of confectionary.

All illness is caused as a result of some type of oxidative stress, and oxidation is inherently linked to inflammation. Therefore, the key to reducing inflammation is to set about reassessing your dietary intake.

Reducing stress levels through meditation, walking, or whatever your preferred choice of relaxation will also assist in the fight against inflammation. Needless to say, exercise in all its forms is vital in combatting the effects of inflammation.

The bottom line is that by making sensible life choices, you can extend life longevity and ensure you lead a happier life free from a revolving door of medication and consultants' visits.

Martina Gallivan

Martina is a nutritionist and director of RK Cardiology Healthy Living Ltd. If you are interested in learning more about health and lifestyle medicine for you or your family please contact her at martina@roseville.ie.

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