

# Fight the 'flame' with food

What you eat can help reduce your risk of inflammation that can cause chronic disease – and it's easier than you think.

By Gina Flaxman

We all know what happens when a wound or joint becomes inflamed: there is swelling, redness, heat and pain.

"Inflammation is a protective immune response designed to help the body clear an irritant and heal from trauma," says Jean Hailes GP Dr Dominique Baume.

In the case of an injury, the inflammation protects us from infection and tissue damage. This is inflammation we can see.

"We're all familiar with this acute inflammation," says Dr Peter Brukner, a specialist sports and exercise physician and the author of *A Fat Lot of Good*, a book that examines diet and health.

However, there is a type of inflammation we cannot see, known as chronic, low-grade inflammation. This inflammation has no external symptoms, but is always there at a low level, says Dr Brukner, "just chipping away at things, creating long-term damage".

"Chronic, low-grade inflammation seems to be a major factor in the development of chronic diseases like

[type 2] diabetes, heart disease and arthritis," says Dr Brukner. "It may also be a factor in the development of dementia and Alzheimer's."

In the case of atherosclerosis – a build-up of plaque inside the arteries and the cause of most heart attacks and strokes – Dr Brukner says the focus is now moving from the impact of cholesterol to that of inflammation. "We now know it's the inflammation that attacks the artery walls," he says.

Dr Brukner says lifestyle factors such as poor diet, lack of exercise, stress, smoking and alcohol have all been shown to increase the body's levels of chronic, low-grade inflammation. "Traditionally, we've tried to treat inflammation with medications," he says. "But making lifestyle changes can have a dramatic effect on inflammation."

## What is an anti-inflammatory diet?

An anti-inflammatory diet involves avoiding or limiting foods that have been shown to increase inflammation, and increasing your intake of foods that reduce it.

"Growing research suggests that reducing certain foods may be helpful for both the symptoms and long-term health outcomes associated with chronic disease," says Dr Baume.

Sugar is particularly inflammatory and consuming high amounts can lead to obesity, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. Dr Brukner, who is the chair of advocacy group SugarByHalf, says the "hidden sugars" found in products such as fruit juice and packaged foods are particularly harmful, as people often aren't aware they're consuming them. "About 70-80% of all processed foods have added sugars," he says.

"The Western diet of highly processed foods tends to promote inflammation," says Dr Baume. She says these foods also often contain harmful trans fats. She says you should also reduce your intake of saturated fats (deep-fried foods), alcohol, soft drinks and refined carbohydrates such as white bread.

Some medical experts also believe consuming too many vegetable oils results in an imbalance of omega-6 fatty acids, which may promote inflammation.

To reduce inflammation, focus on whole, nutrient-dense foods. Dr Baume says the Mediterranean diet is a good example of this. "This diet is rich in green leafy vegetables, tomatoes, fresh fruit (strawberries, blueberries, cherries, oranges), extra-virgin olive oil and nuts (walnuts and almonds), which are good sources of antioxidants," she says.

Fatty fish such as salmon and mackerel contain omega-3 fats, which are particularly good for reducing inflammation.

Some believe fruit and vegetables from the nightshade family, such as eggplant, tomatoes and capsicum, may trigger arthritis flare-ups, but Arthritis NSW says there is limited evidence to support this.


"We just need to get back to eating real food, the way our grandparents used to eat," says Dr Brukner. **GF**

## 'FLAME'-FREE FOOD AT A GLANCE

**What to eat:** A range of fresh, brightly coloured vegetables and fruit, oily fish, nuts, olive oil.

**What to avoid:** Sugary and processed foods, refined carbohydrates, alcohol.

**Healthy swaps:** Swap vegetable or soybean oil for extra-virgin olive oil.

 Learn more about healthy eating

## Recipe

### Fish and vegetable kebabs

By Sandra Villella  
Jean Hailes naturopath

Serves: Makes 12 kebabs  
Prep time: 30-40 mins (plus marinating time)  
Cooking time: 10-12 mins  
Gluten free, dairy free

#### Ingredients

- 1 bunch coriander
- 2 cloves garlic
- Generous pinch of salt
- 1 tbsp turmeric powder
- 2 tbsp freshly grated ginger
- Few grinds of freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp tamari
- 6-8 tbsp extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) plus extra for cooking
- Juice of one lemon
- 4 fillets of white fish (eg, trevally or snapper), cut into 3-4 cm pieces
- 2 zucchinis, halved and sliced 1 cm thick
- 1 eggplant, chopped
- 1 red onion, cut into 8ths
- 12 mushrooms, halved

#### Method

If using wooden skewers, soak in water first.

Separate coriander leaves from stems, finely chop separately. In a mortar and pestle, grind garlic with salt. Add coriander stems and 1/3 of leaves to make a paste. Stir in turmeric, ginger, black pepper, tamari and 4 tbsp EVOO, combine well.



Place 1 tbsp of paste in a bowl and mix with lemon juice. Add fish to marinate.

Stir another 2-4 tbsp EVOO into remaining paste, and toss through vegetables with another 1/3 of coriander leaves to coat well. Put fish and vegetables evenly on skewers (any leftover vegetables can be cooked separately).

Heat a skillet or BBQ grill to medium heat, add splash of oil. Cook 10-12 minutes, turning every 3 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining coriander and serve.

#### Nutritional information

Fish, vegetables and herbs such as ginger and garlic – they're just what the naturopath ordered as part of an anti-inflammatory diet.

Curcumin is the active anti-inflammatory ingredient in turmeric, and its absorption can be enhanced by cooking with oil and adding black pepper.

While oily fish is often promoted as a top source of anti-inflammatory omega-3s, the Heart Foundation website has a great resource that lists fish, seafood and plants from the highest to lowest sources of the omega-3s EPA and DHA.

 Download the recipe from the Jean Hailes website