

Chronic Health

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The Chronic Line On... Anti-Inflammatory Diets

Can cutting out inflammatory foods like added sugar and red meat really reduce chronic inflammation, or is the connection overhyped?

Part of [The Chronic Line](#)

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Chronic inflammation is behind more health problems than you might think—from stiff joints and gum issues to serious conditions like [heart disease](#) and cancer. While many things can spark inflammation in your body, what you eat plays a big role. So, can you reduce inflammation just by changing your diet?

The short answer: Yes, changing your diet can reduce chronic inflammation—especially when you eat more foods that help fight it and cut back on the ones that fuel it. But the specifics can be tricky.

And the longer one: Thousands of studies have linked diet to inflammation levels, measured through blood markers. One [massive review](#)—covering more than 4.3 million people—found that eating more pro-inflammatory foods (like refined grains, processed meats, and sugary drinks) significantly increased the risk of 27 different health conditions. These include heart disease, [diabetes](#), [depression](#), and cancer.

“There’s no strong evidence that anything else—even medication—has as much influence on chronic inflammation as diet,” says [James R Hébert, Sc.D.](#), a leading epidemiologist at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC, and creator of a groundbreaking inflammation-measuring tool called the [Dietary Inflammatory Index](#).

Still, it’s not as easy as eating one or two so-called superfoods, Dr. Hébert says. Rather, you’ll likely need to shift your overall eating pattern to see meaningful results.

Chronic Inflammation

What Is Chronic Inflammation—Care?

Not all [inflammation](#) is bad. When you’re sick or injured, it helps heal you—that’s called *acute inflammation*, and your immune system is in overdrive for too long, you can develop a wide range of diseases, including:



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- Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease
- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- Depression
- Heart disease
- Metabolic syndrome
- Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease
- Osteoporosis
- Type 2 diabetes
- And many "-itis" conditions (like arthritis, bursitis, gingivitis)

Sobering fact: It's estimated that [more than half of all deaths worldwide](#) are linked to chronic inflammation—although that data isn't simple to track. "The hard part is, inflammation isn't easy to measure," explains [Nate Wood, M.D.](#), director of culinary medicine at Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, (they're often vague or unreliable unless you have a s condition." That means many people may not realize inflammation until health problems show up.

Diet and Inflammation

The Clear Link Between Diet and Inflammation

More than a decade ago, Dr. Hébert and his team reviewed all the existing data on food and inflammation and created the [Dietary Inflammatory Index \(DII\)](#). The index scores foods and nutrients based on how they affect inflammation in the body, which was primarily measured through blood tests—negative scores are anti-inflammatory, and positive scores are pro-inflammatory.

Since then, hundreds of studies have confirmed the DII's findings: The foods you eat can either help calm inflammation or make it worse.

Anti-inflammatory foods (with lower, better DII scores) include:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Nuts and legumes
- Fatty fish (like salmon)
- Garlic, onions, herbs, and spices
- Green and black tea

Pro-inflammatory foods (with higher, worse DII scores) include:

- Refined grains
- Added sugars
- Processed meats
- Ultra-processed packaged foods
- Excess saturated fats

“The typical Western diet—full of salt, sugar, and highly processed ingredients—is a perfect recipe for chronic inflammation,” says Dr. Wood.

Dr. Hébert’s research primarily examined how everyday dietary choices influence inflammation levels in the general population. But what about people with chronic conditions where the immune system is already in overdrive—conditions like [rheumatoid arthritis](#), which inflames the joints, or [psoriasis](#), which causes inflammation in the skin? The big question is whether an [anti-inflammatory diet](#) can actually help manage or reduce the more intense, immune-driven inflammation seen in these diseases.

While food alone isn’t a replacement for medication in these cases, emerging research suggests that anti-inflammatory eating patterns may complement medical treatment. Some studies show that [reducing pro-inflammatory foods](#) and emphasizing nutrient-dense, anti-inflammatory ones—like fatty fish, leafy greens, and whole grains—can help lower disease activity, ease symptoms, and improve quality of life for people living with autoimmune or inflammatory conditions. The science is still evolving, but many experts agree that diet can be a powerful tool alongside traditional treatments to help dial down inflammation in the body, even in chronic disease.

What to Eat

What to Eat on an Anti-Inflammatory Diet: Best and Worst Foods

Here’s where things get a little fuzzy. While researchers agree that food impacts inflammation, there’s no one-size-fits-all “anti-inflammatory diet” plan. A [2025 review](#) looked at multiple approaches and found that they all reduced inflammation to some degree—but because the studies used different definitions and measurements, a one-to-one comparison is difficult.

Still, there are basic guidelines that can help you build eating:

- **Start with a solid plan.** The [Mediterranean](#) and [D](#) inflammation.

- **Load up on color and flavor.** Naturally colorful, nutrient-rich foods are typically anti-inflammatory.
- **Spice it up.** Garlic, turmeric, ginger, and saffron aren't just tasty—they're inflammation-fighters.
- **Avoid the beige stuff.** "Foods that promote inflammation are white or colorless and low in nutrients," says Dr. Hébert. "They might taste good, like table sugar, but they lack real flavor and fuel for your body." Red meat, while not beige, is just as problematic, he says.

Bottom Line

The Bottom Line: Can Food Really Fight Inflammation?

Anti-inflammatory diets aren't hype—they're backed by science. You may not be able to measure your exact inflammation levels, but changing your eating habits can make a meaningful impact in how much inflammation is occurring in your body, which in turn can affect a whole host of chronic disease symptoms, from joint swelling to skin rashes, organ functioning, and much, much more.

"Even small positive changes in your diet can help some people feel or function better," says Dr. Wood. "But it's not just about cutting out [bad] foods." What matters just as much—if not more—is filling your plate with the *right* ones.

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