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October 16, 2024

A Spotlight on Chronic Inflammation

Many of us have experienced some form of acute inflammation, our immune system's response to a sudden injury or illness. When this happens, inflammatory cells travel to the site of the injury, which could be a cut on your leg, or a viral or bacterial infection like a flu that causes inflammation in your throat. The purpose of this pain, fever, swelling, or even discoloration are signs that your body is healing itself. Usually, this type of inflammation is short-lived, lasting only a few hours to a few days.

In contrast, chronic inflammation is a lengthy and potentially harmful condition.

What is Chronic Inflammation

Chronic inflammation occurs when your body continues to send inflammatory cells when there is no longer any danger. Basically, the processes that were normally meant to protect your body instead cause it harm. This inflammation may 'wax and wane' depending on a variety of environmental and internal factors.

What Can Cause Chronic Inflammation?

Environmental factors, lifestyle behaviours, and exposure to toxins are often the source of chronic inflammation. Common causes of chronic inflammation include:

- Low levels of physical activity
- Chronic stress
- Obesity – particularly where there is a large presence of visceral fat
- An imbalance of healthy and unhealthy microbes in your gut

- Regular consumption of foods that cause inflammation, such as foods high in trans fat or salt
- Disrupted sleep
- Exposure to toxins, including air pollution, hazardous waste and industrial chemicals
- Using tobacco products
- Regularly drinking too much alcohol
- Age

What are the Symptoms of Chronic Inflammation

Unlike acute inflammation, where symptoms can be felt and/or seen, chronic inflammation is often harder to identify. Symptoms may include:

- Abdominal pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue and/or insomnia
- Fever
- Joint pain or stiffness
- Mouth sores
- A skin rash
- Depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders
- Gastrointestinal (GI) issues, like diarrhea, constipation, and acid reflux
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Frequent infections

These symptoms can range from mild to severe, and can last several months or years.

How Does Chronic Inflammation Impact My Health

Over time, your body's inflammatory response may cause damage to healthy cells, tissues, and organs.

Chronic inflammation is related to the disease process of many conditions including:

- Cancer
- Autoimmune diseases like lupus, psoriasis, and rheumatoid arthritis
- Heart disease and high blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Cognitive decline and dementia (in older adults)
- Gastrointestinal diseases such as Crohn's disease and inflammatory bowel disease
- Depression and anxiety
- Lung diseases including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Prevention and Treatment

If you are experiencing chronic inflammation, your physician may recommend:

- **Over the counter anti-inflammatory drugs.** Over-the-counter medications, like aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil), and naproxen (Aleve), can effectively reduce inflammation and pain. However, long-term use of these medications can put you at an increased risk of other conditions.
- **Steroids.** Corticosteroids are a type of steroid hormone that decreases inflammation and suppresses the immune system. Yet, long-term use of corticosteroids can lead to vision problems, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis.
- **Supplements.** Supplements such as zinc, certain vitamins, and omega-3 may reduce inflammation and enhance repair.
- **Lifestyle changes.** Losing weight, increasing physical activity, and dietary changes (such as a low glycemic diet and reduced saturated fat intake) have all been shown to help lower inflammation.

Eating Habits to Minimize Chronic Inflammation

Anti-inflammatory Foods – high in antioxidants and polyphenols	Foods that Cause Inflammation
• Olive oil • Leafy greens, like kale and spinach • Tomatoes • Fatty fish, like salmon, sardines, and mackerel • Nuts • Fruits, especially cherries, blueberries, and oranges • Spices such as turmeric, ginger, and garlic	• Foods containing trans fat • Fried foods – <i>think french fries and chicken!</i> • Processed meats with nitrates, like hot dogs and some deli meats • Red meat • Foods high in salt • Refined carbohydrates, like sugar, pastries or white bread • Sugar sweetened beverages

Other Ways to Prevent Chronic Inflammation

You may not be able to modify all factors that can result in chronic inflammation; however, you can lower your risk. In addition to focusing on better eating, you can:

- Target 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (like walking) per week
- Avoid smoking and all tobacco products
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Talk to your physician about ways to lower your risk or exposure to the harmful effects from pollution or toxic chemicals

Chronic inflammation can be hard to detect and diagnose. See your physician if you notice symptoms that are persistent, and consider how small changes in your lifestyle and eating habits may help reduce the presence of chronic inflammation.

Sources:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/chronic-inflammation#symptoms>

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/21660-inflammation>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.