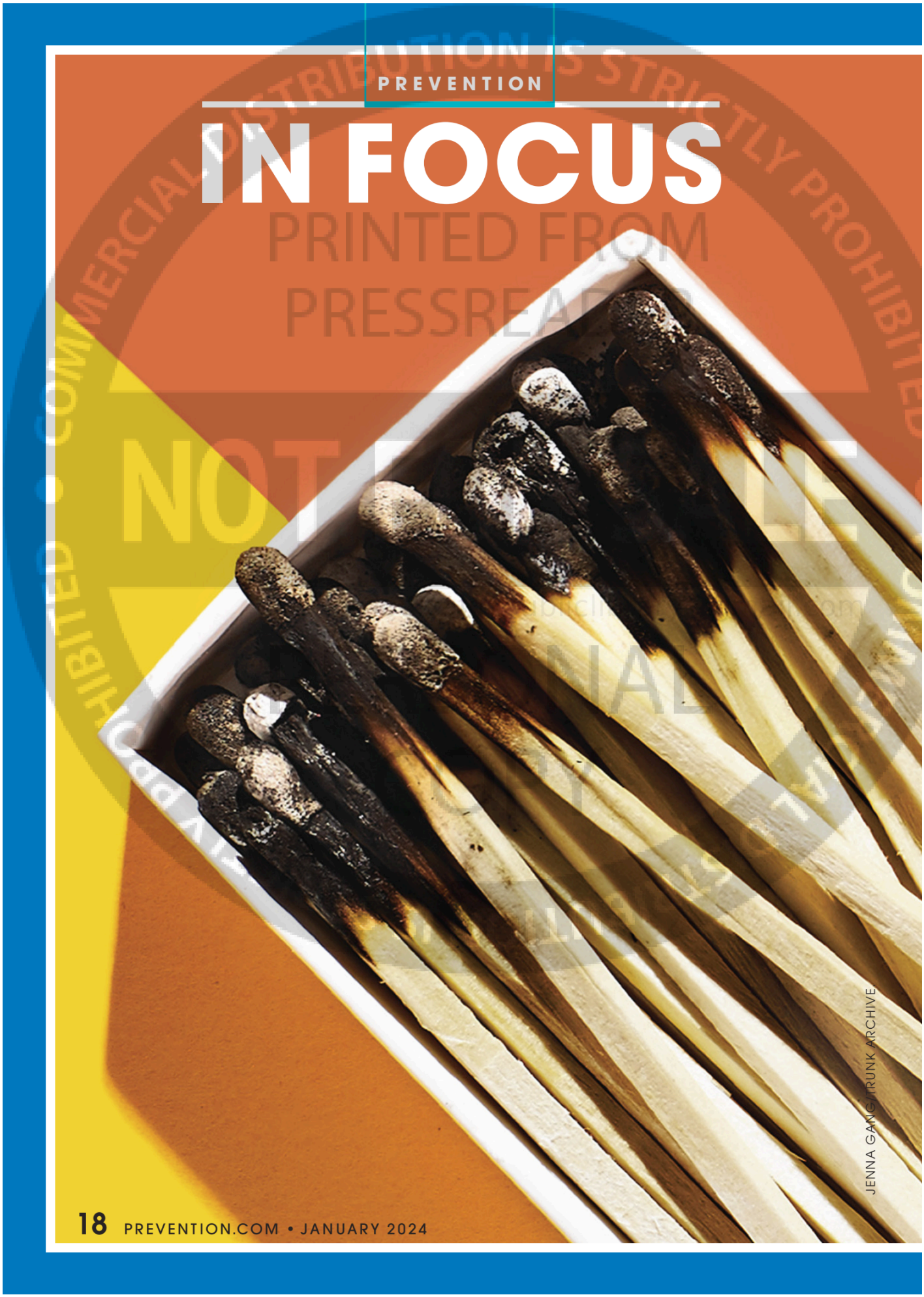
- Inflammation



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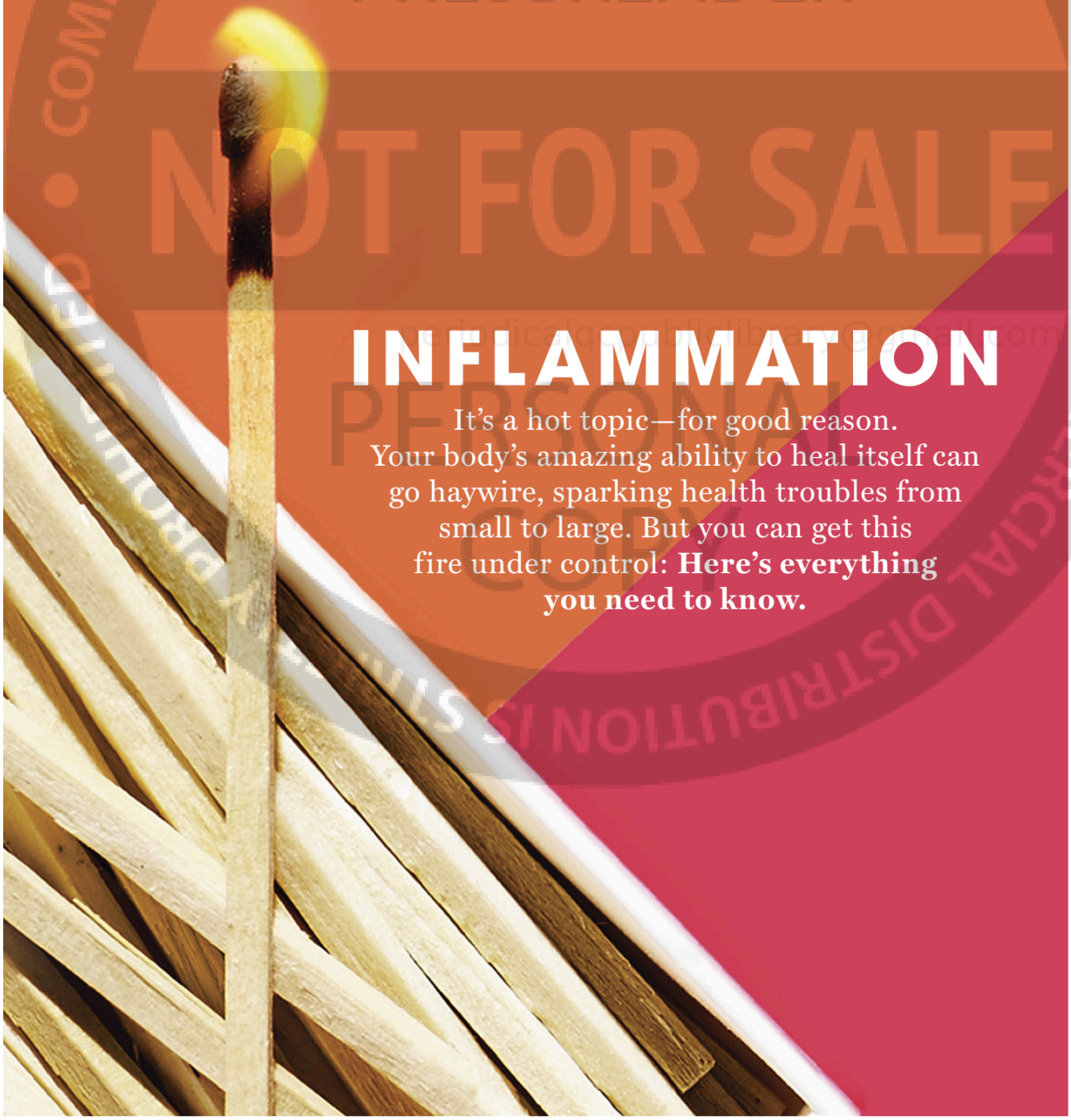

INFLAMMATION

It's a hot topic—for good reason. Your body's amazing ability to heal itself can go haywire, sparking health troubles from small to large. But you can get this fire under control: **Here's everything you need to know.**

IN FOCUS

WHAT IS inflammation, anyway?

BY MARISA COHEN

"INFLAMMATION" IS A WORD YOU HEAR EVERYWHERE—there are foods and gummies and supplements that claim to fight it, and you could fill an entire wall with books on the subject. But we'll admit that it can still be very hard to figure out what the word actually means.

Inflammation is actually helpful and necessary—at least in its acute (or temporary) phase. Without this biological defense system, we wouldn't be able to heal from injuries or fight off infections, says Erica L. Johnson, Ph.D., an associate professor of microbiology, biochemistry, and immunology at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta. "Most of the time this is good, and it helps the body recover," Johnson explains.

Let's say, for example, that you accidentally cut your hand while slicing a bagel. First, your body releases chemicals that act as a kind of red alert; white blood cells respond to this warning and flood the area of your body that needs help (think of a microscopic SWAT team rushing in to fight off the bad guys and protect the injured parts). This can cause pain, swelling, redness, and warmth—all conditions you can see or feel and ones that help your body heal and return to homeostasis, or a state of balance.

When you're fighting off a bacterial infection or an allergen, this protective process happens inside cells, where you can't see it. "An inflammatory response activates your immune system to fight the infection, and that's how you get better," says Sadiya Khan, M.D., Magerstadt Professor of Cardiovascular Epidemiology at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. After white blood cells neutralize the problem, acute inflammation starts to go away, usually within a few days. Soon enough your wound heals, your fever breaks, and you feel better.

But sometimes the body doesn't quite know when to stop, and that's when inflammation goes from helpful to harmful.

When inflammation becomes chronic

Unlike acute inflammation, which ends when the immune system's job is done, chronic inflammation keeps the system on high alert even when there is

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no imminent danger. For example, in an autoimmune disorder like type 1 diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis, the body turns on its own tissues by mistake, seeing them as foreign invaders. The tissues are then constantly inflamed, which can cause pain, rash, tissue damage, and other symptoms. (Learn more on page 23.) Another instance in which chronic inflammation turns potentially deadly: Inflammatory

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SIGNS OF INFLAMMATION

THE SYMPTOMS OF CHRONIC INFLAMMATION overlap with those of many other conditions, so it can be a little tricky to pinpoint what's going on. Several blood tests can check for signs of inflammation, including one that detects a rise in levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) in the liver. The problem is, these tests can't distinguish between acute and chronic inflammation. "You're not trying to identify inflammation as much as look at why it's there," says Dr. Khan. "Routine screenings, specifically your annual physical, are the way to do that."

The signs of acute inflammation (swelling, redness, heat, pain or tenderness, and loss of function) will go away as soon as the injury is healed or the infection is cleared. However, signs of chronic inflammation can linger for months or even years. **These include:**

- Fatigue
- Chest pain
- Achy muscles and joints
- Skin rash
- GI problems such as constipation and diarrhea
- Headaches
- Weight gain

cells in your arteries can cause plaque to develop and build up, which could lead to a stroke. How? The body views the plaque as a foreign substance and initiates even more inflammation to "fight" it—and this causes the plaque to thicken further.

Over time, chronic inflammation can damage healthy cells and lead to permanent DNA damage. In fact, five of the 10 leading causes of death in the United States have been linked to chronic inflammation in one way or another, making inflammation a significant risk to holistic health in the long run. Issues that can be linked to chronic inflammation include Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, various types of cancer, anxiety and depression, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, allergies and asthma, acne, eczema, psoriasis, and arthritis.

How do you fight inflammation?

Thankfully, we are learning more and more each day about how to prevent and control chronic inflammation. It starts with maintaining a healthy lifestyle (see more tips on the following pages) and may also include medications targeted at treating chronic diseases. These things will help you get back to having inflammation be your body's superhero instead of its villain.

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The AUTOIMMUNE connection

BY MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU



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AN ILLNESS IS CLASSIFIED AS AUTOIMMUNE when cells and other immune system components, instead of saving their firepower for invading bacteria or viruses, attack parts of the body, leading to symptoms. And because there are more than 80 autoimmune conditions (lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, celiac disease, and multiple sclerosis are a few), many body parts can be affected, depending on which disease someone has and how their immune system is misfiring.

All these disparate conditions have one thing in common: inflammation. "In general, autoimmune diseases

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manifest and cause symptoms and problems in various organs because of the inflammation that's associated with them," says Zachary Wallace, M.D., a rheumatologist (a specialist in autoimmune and inflammatory conditions) at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. So while not all inflammation involves an autoimmune illness, autoimmune illness generally involves inflammation.

With some autoimmune conditions, inflammation happens right at the start, setting the stage for later problems. For example, in type 1 diabetes, inflammation destroys beta cells in the pancreas, which keeps them from making the insulin needed to store sugar from carbs. Sjögren's syndrome begins when inflammation damages exocrine glands (those that make tears and saliva), leading to severe dryness in the eyes and mouth.

In other autoimmune illnesses, ongoing inflammation is a hallmark symptom. Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is marked by hot, inflamed joints, while inflammation in the digestive tract in someone with ulcerative colitis may cause significant abdominal pain and bloody diarrhea. With multiple sclerosis, inflammation settles in the central nervous system after immune cells attack the coating on nerves; lupus can cause inflammation in the heart, brain, kidney, and other organs. "By definition, 'autoimmune' is a problem with inflammation," says Michael Kaplan, M.D., a rheumatologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.

What causes autoimmune disorders?

RESEARCHERS ARE TRYING TO SUSS THIS OUT, but so far they aren't completely sure. When the immune system acts as it should and viruses, bacteria, or other substances make their way in—say, through the skin, mouth, or lungs—the immune system prompts cells to make antibodies targeting the invaders. The immune system is supposed to inspect the cells it makes, with any that don't behave properly being isolated and destroyed, but in some people that demolition fails to happen and those problematic antibodies attack healthy body parts instead, leading to autoimmune disease and inflammation, Dr. Wallace says.

Genetic predisposition may partly explain many autoimmune problems, but it is not the whole picture; not everyone with the same gene ultimately gets a disease. Once someone is genetically susceptible, it may take an environmental exposure to trigger a condition. That might be smoking (a prime risk factor for RA), chemical toxins, or a viral infection (researchers are watching closely to see whether COVID might cause some autoimmune diseases). Since a majority of autoimmune patients are female, hormones and sex-specific factors likely also play a role in some conditions.

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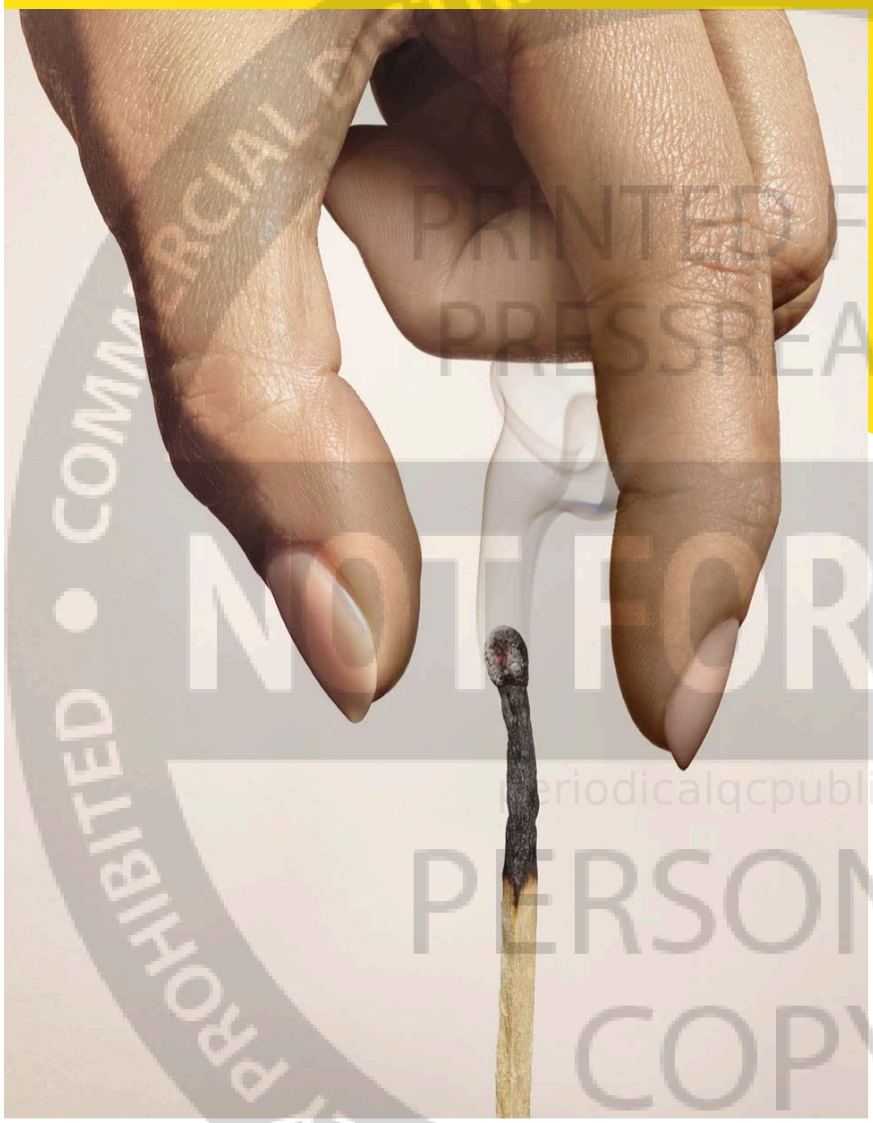

Dr. Kaplan puts it, because they work well and fast but have numerous serious side effects. Rheumatologists do their best to try to minimize the dosage of steroids by adding other medications.

Biologic drugs such as Humira, Remicade, and Enbrel have been game changers; they stop the secretion of a substance that tells other cells to ramp up inflammation, reducing symptoms, such as joint pain in the case of RA. More recent drugs go after various mechanisms involved in creating unwanted inflammation. "Each autoimmune disease causes inflammation through a different pathway. Depending on which pathway we are trying to control, that's the medication we use," says Juan Maya-Villamizar, M.D., a rheumatologist in Palm Beach, FL.

In addition to these powerful meds, other therapies can help (see "How to Lower Inflammation," page 30). People with autoimmune diseases still suffer from pain and other symptoms, but today treatments and ongoing research are light-years ahead of where they were a few decades ago. "This is a very exciting time," Dr. Wallace says. "There are a lot of new therapies on the horizon."

Putting out the fire

DOCTORS HOPE TREATMENTS THAT ACTUALLY RESET THE IMMUNE SYSTEM, curing the illness, might one day become available. For now, though, therapies for autoimmune conditions primarily serve to tamp down inflammation. For decades that has meant steroids, which are "the best drugs and the worst drugs," as

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IN FOCUS

Where ANXIETY fits in

BY UMA NAIDOO, M.D.



JENNA GANG/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

RECENT RESEARCH IS SHOWING US that inflammation is a key factor affecting mental health. Over time, its damage can accumulate to create many issues, including neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease and mental health conditions like anxiety.

Numerous studies have shown that patients suffering from a variety of anxiety disorders have high levels of inflammatory markers. But does anxiety cause inflammation, or does inflammation cause anxiety?

As best we know, it's a two-way street. In animal studies, an influx of simulated

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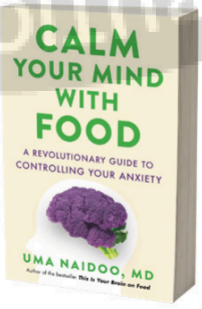
inflammation causes mice to display depressed and anxious behavior, which goes away when they are treated with anti-inflammatory cytokines (cell-signaling proteins). Human studies have shown that inflammation related to sickness can drive shifts in mood, including the development of depression and anxiety.

Meanwhile, chronic stress response is recognized as one of the primary causes of inflammation, and negative emotions like anxiety have been shown to contribute to slower wound healing, leading to greater risk of prolonged inflammation. Mental health issues have also been associated with increased production of inflammatory cytokines. In other words, an anxious brain can cause or worsen inflammation in the body.

We're still in the very early stages of understanding the exact pathways through which inflammation worsens anxiety (and vice versa), but there is great potential for future therapies that reduce inflammation as a method of treating anxiety and other mental health conditions. In fact, some researchers believe the anti-inflammatory effects of SSRIs such as fluoxetine (Prozac) and escitalopram (Lexapro) may play a role in how they work on anxiety. Even anti-inflammatory drugs that aren't designed to treat mental health problems can have a positive effect: In a 2020 study on the effectiveness of the familiar anti-inflammatory aspirin on mental health issues in cancer patients, researchers found that patients who had already been taking aspirin regularly had significantly lower rates of anxiety and depression than those who had not.

This isn't to suggest that everyone suffering from anxiety should immediately start taking aspirin, because even seemingly harmless over-the-counter drugs can come with complications and side effects (for example, daily aspirin use thins the blood and can lead to gastrointestinal bleeding). It will take further research to determine the efficacy and safety of treatments built around anti-inflammatory pharmaceuticals.

What we already know, however, is that one of the primary drivers of chronic inflammation is a poor diet, and one of the best ways to reduce inflammation is a healthy diet full of anti-inflammatory foods. If eating poorly aggravates inflammation and inflammation worsens anxiety, eating an anti-inflammatory diet will fight anxiety. So for now, the very best thing you can do is to structure your diet in a way that avoids pro-inflammatory foods and prioritizes anti-inflammatory foods.



Adapted from *Calm Your Mind With Food: A Revolutionary Guide to Controlling Your Anxiety* by Uma Naidoo, M.D. Copyright © 2023 Uma Naidoo. Used with permission of Little, Brown Spark, an imprint of Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., New York, NY. All rights reserved.

Does that CAUSE inflammation?



ALCOHOL

YES

In addition to increasing intestinal inflammation, frequent consumption of alcohol can disrupt gut bacteria, change brain structure and function, raise blood pressure, and increase risk of stroke and heart disease. New recommendations suggest that men should cut their alcohol consumption to just one beverage daily, in line with the existing guidance for women.

LONELINESS

YES

Research from the University of Surrey found that socially isolated people tended to have C-reactive protein, a marker of inflammation, in their blood. And previous studies have connected loneliness with higher pro-inflammatory gene expression. Cut your risk by staying in touch with people you care about—in person, not just on social media.

DAIRY

NO

"Dairy is not a cause of inflammation in the body, and most people don't have to cut it out of their diets to reduce inflammation," says Rudolph Bedford, M.D., a gastroenterologist at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, CA. In fact, some studies suggest that foods like milk, cheese, and yogurt may actually help reduce inflammation. One caveat: If you have an intolerance of or an allergy to dairy, it's possible that dairy could activate an inflammatory response ranging in severity from rashes or hives to anaphylaxis.

GETTY IMAGES.

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TOMATOES

NO

Foods in the nightshade family get a bad rap because they contain alkaloids, potentially toxic compounds that are likely there to help the plant ward off pests. "Inflammation may occur with extremely high doses of alkaloids, but the amount consumed through eating ripe and well-prepared nightshade vegetables is safe for most individuals," says Emily Sullivan, R.D.N. Research has also shown that the lycopene in tomatoes may protect against inflammation. Some people with arthritis do report improvement in their symptoms when they avoid these foods, so if you are among them, it may be helpful to talk to a doctor about food sensitivities.

FRIED FOOD

YES

Those chicken fingers may be a hit at the tailgate party, but fried foods are high in toxins connected to inflammation. A new study in *Environmental Sciences* suggests that consuming a lot of these types of foods may produce inflammation in the brain that could cause anxiety and depression.

COFFEE

IT'S TRICKY

Coffee contains antioxidants with anti-inflammatory properties; however, you can quash these benefits if you drink too much of the caffeinated kind or if you add sugar or syrups, says Jackie Newgent, R.D.N., C.D.N., author of *The Plant-Based Diabetes Cookbook*. It also depends on which drinks you prefer: Espresso and unfiltered coffee contain more diterpenes, which can raise levels of unhealthy fats in the body, notes dietitian Chrissy Arsenault, R.D.N. "To avoid this mild inflammatory effect, opt for filtered coffee."

SMOKING

YES

One study comparing smokers with nonsmokers found that smoking was connected with increased blood levels of CRP, fibrinogen, IL-6, and CEA—all markers of inflammation. And not just cigarette smoke is troubling—recent research during the California wildfires found that even for healthy people, inhaling wildfire smoke could lead to inflammation and a risk of lung disease.

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How to LOWER inflammation

1 PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU EAT.

Certain foods make inflammation worse (see page 33), and one way to investigate which trigger inflammation for you is to try an elimination diet, says Brooke Scheller, D.C.N., C.N.S., author of *How to Eat to Change How You Drink*. A nutritionist can guide you: You'll eliminate problematic foods like red and processed meats, sugar, and fried foods and track your symptoms for three weeks before slowly reintroducing foods to see if symptoms return.

2 PRACTICE STRESS RELIEF.

Research shows that stress induces or worsens depression, neurodegenerative diseases, and cancer through inflammation. Find stress-relief methods that work for you. Try meditating, turning off phone notifications, taking a warm bath, or playing with a furry friend.

3 GET MOVING.

A Duke University study showed that exercise helped decrease muscle damage from chronic inflammation. Choose an activity you enjoy—walking, dancing, strength training, cycling—and do it a few times a week. Aim for at least 150 total minutes of weekly exercise.

4 SPICE IT UP.

Turmeric has anti-inflammatory properties believed to help treat inflammatory bowel disease and arthritis. Aim for 500 mg to 1,000 mg of turmeric daily—you can add it to smoothies, curries, or eggs, and when possible, combine it with black pepper. "Some evidence shows that turmeric is more readily available in the body when paired with black pepper," Scheller says. Another spicy tip: "Boil slices of peeled ginger in water for 20 minutes; enjoy as a tea for the most potent benefits," Scheller adds.

5 TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT MEDS.

In some cases, NSAIDs such as ibuprofen and corticosteroids like prednisone may help manage chronic inflammation. They lower inflammation caused by overactivity of the immune system prompted by conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.

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EAT to BEAT inflammation

BY WINTANA KIROS, R.D.N., L.D.N., AND JESSICA "CHEF JESS" SWIFT, M.S., R.D.N.

What should a person eat to feel their best? Spend 10 minutes Googling or scrolling through social media and you'll find a dizzying number of answers in the form of fad diets and superfoods. But wellness doesn't have to entail a complicated or restrictive meal plan or expensive, inaccessible ingredients or supplements.

As registered dietitians, we've been asked by countless clients for health-supportive eating plans that are simple, balanced, and delicious. Our answer has been the same for more than a decade: anti-inflammatory foods. Tackling body-wide inflammation is at the core of being healthy in the years to come; too-high levels of it contribute to chronic health problems including heart disease, diabetes, and

GETTY IMAGES.

cancer. And constant inflammation can also impact our day-to-day lives in smaller ways. It may be the reason a person feels inexplicably fatigued or foggy-headed, their skin seems sensitive, or they're prone to catching every cold that comes around.

Science shows us that inflammation can stem from, and also be affected by, many factors, and one of the biggest influences on it is diet (poor sleep, spiraling stress, and getting too little exercise are other biggies). Choosing the wrong foods too frequently can trigger inflammatory responses, but picking the right ones may actually fight and prevent inflammation to help us feel our best. We've seen the power of anti-inflammatory eating in our joint practice: Clients who eat this way have improved their insulin resistance, gotten off blood pressure medications, and much more.

Ready to create a healthier lifestyle and make sustainable changes? We've created a 28-day menu that emphasizes the positive (more delicious health-promoting foods) rather than the negative (no dessert!) so you can thrive and feel good on your journey to better health. Let's get eating!

Get to know these four pillars of an anti-inflammatory diet:

Focus on fiber

Fiber helps stabilize blood sugar and prevent spikes that can cause the body to overproduce harmful inflammatory free radicals. Fiber also keeps you satisfied for hours, lowers your LDL (bad) cholesterol level, aids in the removal of toxins from the body, supports immune health, and helps you stay regular. You'll want to get plenty of both soluble and insoluble fiber. Soluble fiber attracts water to form a gel-like substance in the gut, which, since it slows digestion and isn't easily absorbed into the bloodstream, lowers blood sugar and helps keep cravings at bay. Insoluble fiber works like an intestinal broom, sweeping stool and toxins through the gut to support healthy bowel movements.

FIND SOLUBLE FIBER IN:

beans, avocado, sweet potato, pears, figs, oats, barley, carrots

FIND INSOLUBLE FIBER IN:

prunes, leafy greens, whole wheat, nuts, unpeeled apples

Lean into omega-3's

These polyunsaturated fats may help boost a process within cells that cleans out dysfunctional or unnecessary proteins that might otherwise cause inflammation, and they also play an integral role in heart, lung, blood vessel, and immune system function. Women should aim to get 1.1 g per day, while men should get 1.6 g.

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FIND OMEGA-3'S IN:

fatty fish such as salmon, tuna, mackerel, and herring; oysters; chia seeds; walnuts; flaxseeds; hemp seeds

Load up on antioxidants

To put it simply, polyphenols help turn off the body's inflammation switch. Found in colorful plant foods, these micronutrients act as powerful antioxidants that can help lessen or prevent inflammatory damage caused by free radicals. In fact, many experts regard them as "life span essentials" for their potential to reduce chronic disease risk. Make it a goal to get as many colors as you can on your plate each day. This will ensure that you get a variety of antioxidants that play different roles (for example, anthocyanins support heart health, and lycopene offers protection from the sun's UV rays and may reduce the risk of some cancers). Many herbs and spices also possess antioxidant properties, so experiment with seasonings.

FIND ANTIOXIDANTS IN:

berries, leafy greens, tomatoes, beets, red cabbage, sweet potatoes, beans, dark chocolate, herbs and spices, tea, coffee

Pack in protein

Protein-focused meals help keep blood sugar levels stable, preventing the release of excess insulin and thereby thwarting the formation of inflammation; they also keep you energized and satiated. Getting enough protein at breakfast is particularly important—this starts you out with stable blood sugar levels and reduces your risk of having an inflammation-causing carb crash later on in the day. Find yummy reasons to incorporate more protein into your daily meals. Try adding low-fat milk and peanut butter to oatmeal, or grab a hard-boiled egg and a granola bar.

FIND PROTEIN IN:

seafood, poultry, eggs, low-fat dairy, beans, lentils, nuts, tofu, tempeh

AVOID THESE!

- Refined carbohydrates
- Processed meat
- Fried foods
- Sweetened beverages
- Trans fats
- Added sugars

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IN FOCUS

Try these anti-inflammatory RECIPES!



Breakfast

STRAWBERRY-THYME MILLET BOWL

ACTIVE **15 MIN.**
TOTAL **45 MIN.**
SERVES **4**

- **1 lb strawberries, hulled and halved**
- **4 sprigs fresh thyme, plus more for serving**
- **1 Tbsp olive oil**
- **1 Tbsp honey**
- **1 cup 2% milk, plus more for serving**
- **1 cup millet**
- **1½ tsp pure vanilla extract**
- **2 Tbsp finely chopped unsalted pistachios**
- **2 Tbsp hemp seeds**

1. Heat oven to 450°F. On rimmed baking sheet, toss strawberries, thyme, oil, and honey. Roast until berries begin to release juices, about 10 min. Remove from oven and discard thyme. **2.** Meanwhile, in saucepan, bring milk and 1 cup water to a boil. Stir in millet and vanilla, reduce heat, and simmer, covered, until millet is tender and liquid is

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DANIELLE DALY.

absorbed, 25 to 30 min. Serve millet with berries and pan juices, a splash of milk, pistachios, hemp seeds, and thyme.

PER SERVING *About 358 cal, 11 g fat (2 g sat fat), 6 mg chol, 37 mg sodium, 54 g carb, 7 g fiber, 4.5 g sugar (4.5 g added sugar), 11 g pro*

Snack

TOMATO TOASTS WITH MINT YOGURT AND SUMAC VINAIGRETTE

ACTIVE **10 MIN.**
TOTAL **10 MIN.**
SERVES **4**

- ½ cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1 scallion, finely chopped, plus more for sprinkling
- ¼ cup mint, chopped
- 2 tsp grated lemon zest
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- ¼ tsp cumin seed
- ¼ tsp ground sumac
- ¼ tsp coarsely cracked pepper
- Kosher salt

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- **4 pieces bread, toasted**
- **3 medium heirloom tomatoes, sliced**

1. In bowl, combine yogurt, scallion, mint, and lemon zest.
2. In second bowl, whisk olive oil, lemon juice, cumin seed, ground sumac, pepper, and ¼ tsp salt.
3. Spread yogurt mixture on toast, top with tomatoes, and spoon vinaigrette on top. Sprinkle with additional chopped scallion if desired.

PER SERVING *About 182 cal, 10 g fat (2 g sat fat), 4 mg chol, 243 mg sodium, 17 g carb, 4 g fiber, 5.5 g sugar (0 g added sugar), 8 g pro*

Dinner

QUICK SEAFOOD STEW

ACTIVE **25 MIN.**
TOTAL **25 MIN.**
SERVES **4**

- **2 Tbsp olive oil**
- **1 bulb fennel, quartered, cored, and thinly sliced**
- **¼ tsp red pepper flakes**
- **Kosher salt and pepper**
- **4 cloves garlic, grated**
- **1 cup dry white wine**
- **1 14-oz can crushed tomatoes**
- **2 cups low-sodium seafood or chicken broth**
- **½ lb mussels, rinsed**
- **½ lb peeled and deveined medium shrimp**
- **8 oz cod, cut into 2-in. pieces**
- **¼ cup fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped**
- **Crusty bread, for serving**

1. In large pot on medium, heat oil. Add fennel, red pepper flakes, and ½ tsp each salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, 5 to 6 min. Stir in garlic and cook 1 min.
2. Add wine and simmer until reduced by half,

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5 to 6 min. Stir in tomatoes and broth and return to a simmer.

3. Add mussels, shrimp, and cod and simmer until fish and shrimp are opaque throughout and mussels have opened, 3 to 4 min. Sprinkle with parsley and serve with crusty bread if desired.

PER SERVING *About 267 cal, 10 g fat (1.5 g sat fat), 107 mg chol, 963 mg sodium, 18 g carb, 4 g fiber, 7.5 g sugar (0 g added sugar), 28 g pro*

Additional reporting by Kayla Blanton, Alisa Bowman, Madeleine Haase, Lambeth Hochwald, Korin Miller, and Lisa Mulcahey

DIVE INTO YOUR NEW ANTI-INFLAMMATION LIFESTYLE

THESE RECIPES ARE FROM OUR BOOK *28-DAY ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DIET,* and when you become a member of **Prevention Premium Health 360**, you'll get a copy of it in the mail along with two of our other books (*Get Sharper Every Day* and *Lift Light, Get Lean*). Plus, your membership gets you the annual Prevention planner, a year of the magazine, unlimited site access, and more. Join today!
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