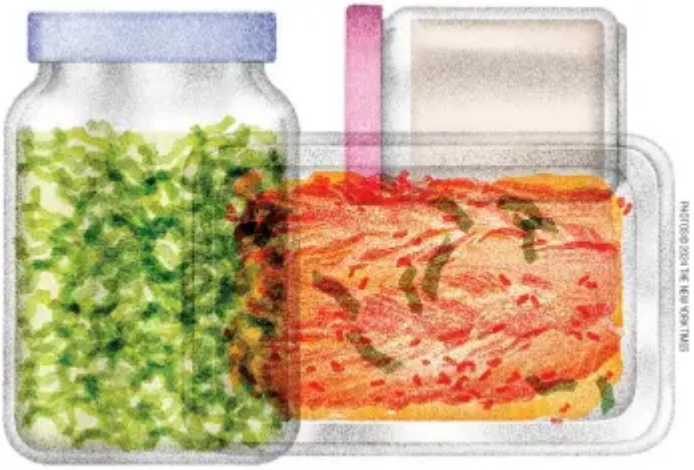
- Inflammation

TURN DOWN THE HEAT

The foods that fight inflammation

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Experts sometimes describe inflammation as a necessary evil. On one hand, this essential immune system response helps you stay safe and heal from illnesses, though it isn't always pleasant, often causing symptoms like redness, swelling and soreness.



But when inflammation levels in your body remain high for months or years at a time — even in the absence of a threat — it can create health risks of its own. Untreated, chronic inflammation can increase the risk of serious health issues like cancer, cardiovascular disease, arthritis and metabolic conditions like Type 2 diabetes.

The condition, which some surveys estimate affects about one-third of US adults, is hard to diagnose. This is in part because chronic inflammation symptoms can vary widely and there isn't a test that can reliably diagnose it.

Diets high in highly processed and sugary foods are connected to chronic inflammation, while consuming certain healthy foods — fresh fruits, vegetables, fibre and certain fats — have been shown to help tamp it down. Here are the foods with demonstrated anti-inflammatory benefits.

VEGETABLES, ESPECIALLY LEAFY GREENS

Dr Sean Spencer, a gastroenterologist and physician-scientist at Stanford University, said that the fibre in vegetables is essential for feeding and maintaining the gut microbiome, which signals the immune system to keep inflammation down. The antioxidants in vegetables can help reduce inflammation too.

Tami Best, a dietitian in Rochester, New York, recommended leafy green vegetables such as spinach, kale, collard greens, broccoli, Swiss chard and arugula, which are high in antioxidants.

And vegetables rich in apigenin — a type of plant compound called a flavonoid that has anti-inflammatory properties — are also helpful, Best said. These include celery, carrots

and parsley.

Barbara Olendzki, an associate professor of medicine at UMass Chan Medical School who developed an anti-inflammatory diet, said that most people don't consume enough vegetables, but there are easy ways to incorporate more.

She recommended mixing onions, spinach and tomatoes into your eggs or adding grated carrots or leafy greens into pasta sauce.

FRUITS, ESPECIALLY BERRIES

Fruits are another fibre- and antioxidant-rich anti-inflammatory food group, Best said.

She noted that tart cherries and berries, particularly blueberries, are rich in inflammation-fighting flavonoids.

She also advised eating citrus fruits because they're rich in vitamin C, an antioxidant that protects cells against oxidation, which can lead to inflammation.

LEGUMES

Dr Nate Wood, a physician and director of culinary medicine at Yale School of Medicine, said that beans, lentils, edamame, tofu, tempeh and other legume-based foods can be powerful inflammation fighters because they are high in fibre and antioxidants.

Leona West Fox, a functional nutritionist in Santa Monica, California, said that not only are legumes beneficial to the gut microbiome, they're also rich in vitamins and minerals like folate and magnesium, which some suggest are associated with lowering inflammation.

Legumes are versatile, Best said. Add them to a soup or salad, enjoy them on their own, or whip them into a hummus or black bean spread to pair with vegetables. Or roast some chickpeas with a little olive oil and seasoning of your choice for a healthy snack, she added.

TURMERIC AND OTHER SPICES

Spices can be another inflammation fighter, though most people don't typically consume large volumes of them.

Curcumin, a compound found in turmeric, has been linked to reduced inflammation in animals. Studies also have shown that spices such as ginger, cardamom and garlic can also help with inflammation.

FERMENTED FOODS

Some studies suggest that consuming a variety of fermented foods, like yoghurt, kimchi, sauerkraut and kombucha may help reduced inflammation as well.

In one small study, published in 2021, researchers split 36 healthy adults into two groups — one that was instructed to eat a diet rich in fermented foods, while the other had a diet high in fibre. By the end of the study, the group that ate more fermented foods saw consistent decreased levels of inflammation, while the other group saw a mix of results depending on the state of their gut microbiome at the beginning of the study.

Still, Wood said more research is needed on whether eating fermented foods can meaningfully reduce inflammation. Just avoid fermented foods such as certain yoghurts and kombuchas that contain added sugars, Spencer said.

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

Studies suggest that omega-3 fatty acids may also fight inflammation. Wood said that these healthy fats can help make molecules called resolvins and protectins in the body, which "seem to lower levels of inflammation", he explained, "although researchers are still investigating how", he added. Foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids include fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, tuna), eggs, nuts (particularly walnuts) and seeds (such as flax and hemp). West Fox recommended spreading a tablespoon of nut butter onto apple slices or sprinkling ground flax seeds into yoghurt, oatmeal or a salad.

COFFEE AND TEA

Coffee and tea are antioxidant-rich, so consuming them in moderation might help cut down inflammation, Wood said. In a 2015 study of about 1,700 older white adults, regular coffee drinkers were found to have lower levels of certain inflammatory markers than those who didn't regularly drink coffee.

Just be mindful of any added sugar, Olendzki said.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Since various nutrients can help reduce inflammation in different ways, those looking to decrease inflammation should focus on consuming a wide variety of different fruits, vegetables, fiber, omega-3s and other inflammation fighting foods, Wood said. He recommended eating at least 30 different foods per week.

Indeed, there isn't one magic bullet food or product that will quell inflammation on its own, but Spencer said there are many healthy, delicious menu choices that can help, and he encourages people to find some they love. There's a whole universe of flavour beyond processed foods, he added.