

What is chronic inflammation?

An integrative approach to explaining systemic, or chronic, inflammation and its significance to your health.

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Think of the balance of the seasons. What fuels the regenerative cycle? The power of the sun does. Without the heat of the sun, we would have eternal winter — nothing could grow or live. Now imagine the opposite: a world on fire where the heat scorches everything in its path. In the same way, that the Earth requires balance, our bodies rely on just enough inflammation — but not too much — to fuel the natural regeneration of cells and ward off infection and disease.

The inflammatory response is a basic mechanism of our immune system. But there is danger in having too much of a good thing: while a healthy immune response includes sporadic bouts of acute inflammation, it's not okay to stay perpetually inflamed. When you get to the point where the built-in checks and balances of your immune system can't contain your inner fire, inflammation is considered chronic and systemic. And we're seeing it in more and more of our patients.

Chronic inflammation gradually destroys an otherwise beautiful machine. It upsets the delicate balance among all of our major systems: endocrine, central-nervous, digestive, and cardiovascular/respiratory, creating health issues with one or several or all. In a healthy body, these systems communicate with and respond to one another. With chronic inflammation, that cross-talk no longer works.

Chronic inflammation in conventional medicine

Progressive doctors will now discuss inflammation as a root cause when you present with diseases like asthma, allergies, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), or rheumatoid arthritis. Heart disease is on the verge of joining this notorious group, but there are still some unanswered questions about the link to inflammation. Obesity and Alzheimer's may soon follow.

Despite this progress, there are problems with conventional medicine's approach. First is the issue of specialization. Traditionally, a specialist looks at your symptoms as they relate to particularly affected organs — a cardiologist for your heart, a pulmonologist for your lung, and so on. Treatment is symptom-specific and relate only to the relevant system of your body. In other words, from the outside in — the opposite of holistic medicine.

A second problem is the drug-based approach of conventional medicine. Legions of pharmaceutical drugs have been developed to interrupt the inflammatory cascade. Over-the-counter NSAID's (non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs) like Motrin and Advil disrupt the production of prostaglandins. Corticosteroids like Prednisone, Cox-II inhibitors like Vioxx and Celebrex, and antihistamines and ACE inhibitors have followed suit, each targeted at shutting down a different inflammatory mechanism.

A third problem is that medical science doesn't know how drugs interact with each other. For example, a patient might simultaneously be put on Lipitor to lower cholesterol, Prednisone for respiratory relief and Motrin for pain. The odds that these drugs interact are nearly 100%, but there are no long-term studies of multiple drug interactions.

Most patients who come who seek alternative medicine have been on multiple drugs over long periods of time have generally seen their health deteriorate. That's because the pharmaceutical drugs do nothing to heal the underlying issues that created the inflammation in the first place — when they stop taking the drugs, the symptoms come back.

(We don't advocate stopping your prescriptions. Many drugs are essential, especially as the first stage in healing. We do advocate finding natural solutions to the underlying cause of your problems, which in many cases will allow you, with the help of your healthcare practitioner, to reduce the number or dosages of prescriptions you are taking.)

Still, we are happy to see medical science map out the links between inflammation and almost every disease related to poor quality of life and aging — from obesity to Alzheimer's to cancer.

Lifestyle choices to reduce inflammation

When I talk about lifestyle, I think of three dominating factors: diet, exercise and habits. When we're looking at inflammation all three are very important.

Nutrition: It's almost impossible for the average American to get the right quantity of necessary nutrients on a daily basis without a supplement. Adding the right supplements to your diet and eating foods rich in anti-inflammatory compounds like flavanoids provide a valuable countermeasure to chronic inflammation.

Physical activity: Exercise, including sexual activity, is potent medicine. It releases compounds such as endorphins into the blood that act as a natural anti-inflammatory. Almost everyone with an inflammation-related condition finds more control and relief when they exercise. Exercise lowers CRP, regulates insulin levels and creates muscle, which helps the body regulate weight. Mindful exercise done in concert with deep breathing, like yoga, walking, tai chi, and Pilates has the double benefit of reducing psychological stress.

Habits: Smoking, recreational drug use and excessive alcohol and caffeine grate on our systems and incite free radicals. Smoking raises levels of CRP. Chronic cocaine and marijuana use have been shown to accelerate atherosclerosis. As a rule of thumb, it's good to remember that our body reacts to foreign substances as intruders to be wiped out — sending the immune system into overdrive.

Weight loss: Let me add a special note for people who are dieting and already suffer from an inflammatory condition. Because toxins are stored in fat cells, burning that fat releases those toxins. Such people may feel awful while losing weight. Those feelings are temporary, especially if you understand how to support your body's natural detoxification. But those stored toxins make it all the more important to reduce inflammation every way you can.