

The downward spiral of weight gain and chronic pain

How anti-inflammatory foods can fight this destructive cycle.

You are what you eat is an old cliché with a lot of truth. That's especially true when it comes to excess weight and chronic pain. Recent research has shown that the Total Western Diet (TWD), which emphasizes high-calorie, low-nutrition foods made with processed carbohydrates, saturated fats, and refined sugar, can trigger ongoing inflammation, and hence, worsen chronic pain.

According to Nancee Jaffe, a registered dietitian with the UCLA Digestive Health and Nutrition Clinic, a lot of the disorders causing mortality in America are those in which inflammation has run rampant in the body. Those disorders include obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cognitive issues like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, certain cancers and arthritis. All of these conditions involve inflammatory processes that are chronic and sustained in the body.

"Pain associated with chronic inflammatory disorders can lead to more and more problems in the body," explains Jaffe. "Diet can make a profound difference."

Study shows link between poor diet and increased pain

A recent study from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, published in *The Journal of Pain*, investigated the functional and physiological consequences of a nutritionally poor diet. The outcomes of 13 weeks on the TWD showed a significant increase in fat mass and a decrease in lean mass. Tests also revealed increases in pro-inflammatory cytokines, signals that promote systemic inflammation, as well as increases in serum leptin, a hormone secreted by adipose (fat) tis-



Eating the right nutrient-rich foods can help reduce inflammation-related pain.

sue that acts to regulate long-term appetite and energy expenditure. While it may seem like elevated leptin might be positive because it helps regulate appetite, unfortunately, most obese people become leptin-resistant so their brains do not get the satiety message and hence they keep feeling hungry and continue eating.

Additionally, the body doesn't feel as full on the low-nutrition foods that make up the majority of the TWD. It's why you can eat an entire bag of cookies or potato chips but not five bananas or baked potatoes. Low-nutrition processed food choices trigger a cascade of problems, including a nervous system with a distorted perception of pain, according to UAB researchers.

"Because poor diet heightens hypersensitivity, patients with chronic pain who regularly practice bad diet habits are likely to experience exaggerated pain responses and slower recovery from injury or surgery," says lead researcher Robert Sorge, PhD, UAB College of Arts and Sciences.

Mediterranean diet continues to lead the way toward healthier living

For some time now, the Mediterranean diet has been the go-to recom-

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The Mediterranean diet key ingredients:

- Lean meat and chicken
- Whole grains, fresh fruit and veggies
- Fish and other seafood
- Oil olive as the main source of fat

mendation of health experts. And the accolades continue.

"When you look at the plate, it's mostly going to be made of fruits and vegetables, beans, legumes and whole grains," explains Jaffe. "The proteins tend to be healthy fatty fishes, like omega-3-rich salmon, black cod, sardines, herring, as well as lean protein with very limited amounts of red meat and processed foods."

In addition to choosing basic non-processed ingredients, you have to cook your food. Consider making it a family occasion and an education opportunity, especially if you have grandkids. Let them help prep the food such as veggies, which they will be more likely to eat if they're the ones who helped prepare them.

A key ingredient in the Mediterranean diet is olive oil, which is rich with healthful properties. Jaffe recommends that you look for olive oils that tout "early harvest" on their labels. That means that the olives were picked while still green and they produce the highest antioxidant oil. Avoid clear bottles, as light and heat ruin nutrient composition.

Combat chronic pain with these ingredients

Anti-inflammatory food ingredients include garlic, onion, cinnamon and turmeric. A well-stocked kitchen makes it easier to whip up a healthy meal in minutes. There are dozens of cookbooks and online sources to inspire culinary ideas.

An occasional indulgence won't derail health. But better food choices as a general rule can help reduce chronic pain issues, and help you look better, too. ■