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What is the anti-inflammatory diet?

Typical western diets are thought to increase inflammation - where the immune system reacts and causes internal swelling throughout the body. As long-term inflammation can become harmful, anti-inflammatory diets are thought to protect us from a wide range of health problems.

What is the anti-inflammatory diet?

An anti-inflammatory diet, used as a remedy to fight inflammation in the body, has no strict plan for calories, portion sizes, or even recipes to follow. It's more of a general emphasis on eating a variety of anti-inflammatory foods, found in fruits, vegetables, unrefined whole grains, oily fish, unsaturated fats, spices, tea, coffee, and dark chocolate.

It also involves limiting other foods that promote inflammation, including fried foods, sugary treats and drinks, saturated fats, and excessive amounts of alcohol.

Inflammation has become somewhat of a bad word in the world of health, but in truth it's a healthy immune system response we all need at certain times. For example, it's inflammation that causes us to sneeze or cough allergens and viruses out the body when we're unwell. It also causes pain and swelling where we've been injured, telling us to be gentle with this area.

Yet, this helpful level of inflammation should subside when you heal. When it doesn't, the blood rushing and swelling inside your body starts to damage cells and cause problems. This long-term inflammation, known as metaflammation, can lead to serious conditions like [cardiovascular disease](#), [type 2 diabetes](#), [Alzheimer's disease](#), and [breast](#) or [colon cancer](#).

Most likely to have harmful inflammation

Metaflammation is symptomless until it causes problems, so people who follow an anti-inflammatory diet tend to do so as a precaution and part of a healthy lifestyle. You do have a higher chance of harmful inflammation if you:

- **Follow a Western diet** - this generally refers to diets that contain ultra-processed, high-fat, and sugary foods. It also encompasses other health issues linked to many Western countries like the UK, such as long-term [stress](#) and exposure to [air pollution](#), both of which damage cells¹.
- **Have an autoimmune disorder** - an immune system that doesn't function properly can cause long-term inflammation, as seen in [type 1 diabetes](#), [lupus](#), and [rheumatoid arthritis](#).

Diets that showcase anti-inflammatory foods

The anti-inflammatory diet is more of a guide than a meal plan, but if you prefer more structure and rules there are several popular diets that rely on many anti-inflammatory foods. This includes the heart-healthy **DASH diet**, the long-life promoting **Mediterranean diet**, and the **MIND diet**, which combines these other diets to support brain health.

Why are anti-inflammatory foods good for us?

Anti-inflammatory foods contain natural compounds that fight inflammation. Molecules called antioxidants, plant chemicals like flavanoids, and fibre can protect you against free radicals. These are unstable atoms caused by inflammation that crash into and damage cells, accelerating ageing and causing illness².

These compounds can also help stop your immune system from signalling inflammation to start, as well as prevent rises in blood sugar².

Emerging evidence also suggests that these compounds may help prevent a condition called metabolic endotoxemia, a type of long-term inflammation. They do this by supporting the growth of various beneficial bacteria in your gut³.

Best anti-inflammatory foods

To follow an anti-inflammatory diet, you should try to eat a variety of anti-inflammatory foods, rather than focussing on one or two specific foods. This gives you a wider range of protective compounds, some of which work best together.

Examples include:

- **Fruits** – such as blueberries, strawberries, cherries, and oranges.
- **Leafy green vegetables** – such as kale, spinach, and collards.
- **Other vegetables** – such as avocado, carrots, and tomatoes.
- **Nuts** – such as almonds, walnuts, and cashews.
- **Oily fish** – such as salmon, tuna, and sardines.
- **Legumes** – such as beans, chickpeas, and lentils.
- **High-fibre whole grains** – such as brown rice, bulgur, and whole grain bread.
- **Olive oil** – a healthy [unsaturated fat alternative](#) to butter and other cooking oils.
- **Dark chocolate** – made of at least [70% cocoa solids](#).
- **Green tea** – including [matcha tea](#).

Foods that cause inflammation

The typical Western diet includes processed meats, fast foods, food additives, and refined sugar, and is often lacking in fibre, vitamins, and minerals. This can lead to weight gain and affect our metabolism in a way that damages the immune system, causing inflammation¹.

Excess fat tissue can send signals to immune cells to produce inflammation. Eating saturated fats also raises cholesterol, which increases cell damage by free radicals.

Examples include:

- **Processed carbs** – such as white bread, pastries, and biscuits.
- **Fried foods** – such as chips, battered foods, and doughnuts.
- **Processed red meats** – such as burgers, sausages, and bacon.
- **Saturated fats** – such as margarine, butter, and cream.
- **Sugary drinks** – such as juice, fizzy drinks, and sweet cocktails.
- **Excessive alcohol** – such as beer and spirits.

Further reading

1. [Christ et al: Western diet and the immune system: an inflammatory connection.](#)
2. [Vazhappilly et al: Role of flavonoids in thrombotic, cardiovascular, and inflammatory diseases.](#)
3. [Bailey and Holscher: Microbiome-mediated effects of the Mediterranean diet on inflammation.](#)

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Originally Published: 24/02/2024		Document ID: doc_32532

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