

The Hidden Cause Of Disease

Is inflammation making you sick?

THANKS TO OUR lifestyles—the rise in obesity, the types of food we eat, even the stresses we face—there's a new epidemic threatening to spiral out of control. "Increasingly, doctors are connecting inflammation to some of our nation's biggest health concerns—heart disease, diabetes, and even cancer," says Dr. David Heber, director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition. And our modern habits, from eating too much sugar to getting too little sleep, are making inflammation soar. Luckily, armed with information from the latest studies, you can slash your risk.

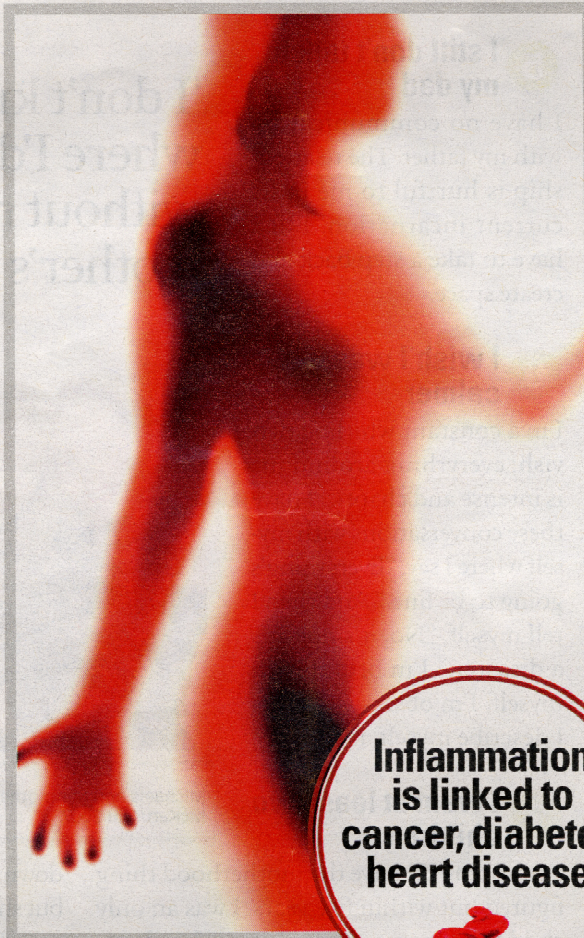
• Your Body at War

Catch a virus or nick yourself shaving—the pain, heat, and swelling that follow are signs that your body is fighting off potential infection. "Inflammation is protective—it's designed to be a good thing," Harvard University's Gelman Professor of Anesthesia Dr. Charles Serhan notes. Problems arise when inflammation doesn't shut down or mistakenly attacks something harmless, often the body itself.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a perfect example: The body perceives an injury where none exists and launches a sustained attack on cartilage and healthy cells. Other inflammatory conditions include allergies and asthma (food and pollen are perceived as intruders) as well as gum disease.

Now, a growing body of research points to

inflammation gone awry as a key player in numerous life-threatening diseases. In addition to being a precursor to diabetes, high levels of inflammation are associated with heart problems. And "while inflammation doesn't cause cancer, cancer needs inflammation to grow and spread," says Dr. David Servan-Schreiber, an adjunct professor of oncology at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.



Inflammation is linked to cancer, diabetes, heart disease.

• The Stress Connection

Obesity, because it can lead to chemical changes in the liver, is a primary cause of inflammation. The foods we eat also play a role. Simple carbohydrates (refined sugar, white flour, and high-fructose corn syrup), omega-6 fatty acids (in corn and soybean oils), and trans fats may cause insulin-resistance and raise inflammation levels. Most worrisome, some say, is chronic stress. In the basic human stress response, the hormones cortisol and adrenaline turn on the body's inflammatory system in order to get through the crisis. This may have worked well in ancient times when the stress had an endpoint, like outpacing a saber-toothed tiger. But now much of our anxiety, whether personal or professional, never goes away—and neither does the inflammation.

• 6-Step Detox Plan

Eat small meals. When volunteers were fed a 900-calorie fast-food breakfast, their blood was full of inflammatory markers for four hours afterward. Eating smaller, fiber-rich meals gives the body time to absorb sugars and fats.

Get moving. "Exercise helps to burn sugars and fats, removing triggers," Dr. Heber says.

Take vitamin D. Research suggests that vitamin D may be anti-inflammatory. It's hard to get enough from food, so try a supplement.

Opt for omega-3s. This essential fatty acid, found in salmon, fortified eggs, and grass-fed beef, may lessen the duration and magnitude of inflammatory attacks.

Play defense. Load up on antioxidant-rich foods. Especially beneficial: dark fruits such as pomegranates and blueberries.

Ease your mind. Stress-reducers like yoga and meditation reduce inflammation.