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Eating away at your pain

BY DR. TODD NORTON AND NICOLA CAMERON

STIFF MUSCLES? MASSAGE therapy. Stiff joints? Pop a pill. Inflammation? Pop a different pill.

Many people treat their injuries and illnesses as if they are caused by one element and treatable by another – usually some kind of drug. This kind of thinking doesn't work when people face symptoms seemingly not caused by anything, or worse, caused by many interacting factors. "One-cause-one-effect" treatment fails.

Many health professionals, however, recognize how substances in our food and air can affect the "many-causes-many-effects" system that is the human body, creating inflammation that may lead to pain, stiffness and fatigue.

Acute inflammation is a bodily response to a sprain or strain, a cut or a burn. You get swelling, pain, redness and tenderness in the injured location. Chronic inflammation can involve a deeper metabolic shift in the body's immune-messaging molecules, making the inflammation constant. That's what happens in arthritis, atherosclerosis, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, fibromyalgia, Crohn's disease and colitis.

But active people, world class athletes and recreational athletes often share this common thread of a physiology "tilted" towards chronic inflammation. They end up with prolonged pain and soreness after exercise, fatigue, poor recovery time, recurrent colds and flu, and an increased susceptibility to injuries.

Natalie, for example, a 37-year-old competitive runner from Ottawa, enjoyed cycling, hiking, and other outdoor activities until recently. However, last spring she'd been getting more than her fair share of pain and stiffness in her muscles and joints. She wore out faster and stayed worn out longer than many of her training partners. "I was on the same training

program as the rest in my group, but seemed to have a lot more pain and stiffness than anyone else. I became afraid of exercise."

Then there's Fred, an active 52-year-old who relished in-line skating, cross-country skiing, and mountain biking. Then he began, like Natalie, to notice unusual and frustrating pain and stiffness, sometimes lasting for days following exercise. He even hurt after doing simple tasks around the house. It perplexed him; his active friends weren't hurting. "I thought age was just catching up to me at first and I should just slow down, but lots of friends who were older than I didn't seem to have any problems."

Fred and Natalie both instinctively examined only their *activities* to uncover a cause for their symptoms. Neither expanded their field of vision to include their entire physiology – and beyond that, their environment. Pain and stiffness can indeed be caused by physical activity, but they can be aggravated by a physiological disposition to inflammation.

Chronic inflammation can be triggered by workplace chemicals, air pollutants, pesticides, and heavy metals like lead and mercury, which can end up in our food. Then there's the more "natural" allergens like poison ivy, pollens and moulds. For some people, what you eat is what can trigger inflammation leading to pain



and symptoms. Examples include some grains, peanuts, dairy products or yeast.

People with diabetes and blood sugar problems can have an inflammatory kickback, as can anyone suffering stress, or bad luck from their genetic heritage.

While environmental toxins and allergens you encounter while going to work and breathing are unavoidable, paying attention to your food is easy. If you are dealing with chronic low-grade complaints, think about whether the foods you eat (coupled with the state of your digestive system) may be contributing to chronic inflammation. How this happens is not always obvious and is fairly common.

Here's how it works with food. One of the largest barriers between external environmental threats and your body is across the lining of your intestines,

which contain more than 50 per cent of your body's immune cells. Spread out your small intestine and you get a surface area as large as a tennis court – that's a lot of room for trouble, as those immune cells confront certain proteins, chemicals and parasites in food. Chemical messenger molecules released from the gut can activate other immune cells in the liver, joints and other tissues, triggering inflammation at these sites.

The resulting grief can take many forms. In the gut, it can be excess bloating and gas; in the joints, pain and stiffness. It doesn't stop there. Fatigue, headaches, more colds and flu, muscle aches, poor recovery after exercise, and susceptibility to recurrent injuries can be part of the picture, and people often accept them as "normal." Unlike severe and often immediate anaphylactic-type reactions (think peanuts or bee stings), these gut reactions may be delayed for 24 to 36 hours. What you ate yesterday may be making you ache today.

That delay means it's hard to figure out which foods might be putting you off stride. To figure out what's doing

the hurting, foods can be systematically removed for a period of time, and then re-introduced to see if they cause the symptoms. A quicker approach is a food allergy test with a health professional to identify what's eating you because of what you are eating.

If seeing a nutritional coach is not possible, here are some guidelines:

- ▶ Avoid or minimize foods that tend to produce inflammation. They include processed foods; refined carbohydrates (like sugar and white flour products); poor quality oils (like cotton seed oil, peanut oil, margarine and shortening); cured meats; fast foods and other high-fat or high-sugar foods; caffeine and alcohol.
- ▶ Avoid known allergens like wheat, dairy, peanuts, citrus, corn, soy, etc.
- ▶ Go organic and seek out those lean sources of protein, and oils from olives, fish, butter, flax, avocado, raw seeds and nuts. Eat slow-release carbohydrates like beans, peas, lentils, brown rice and millet; organic fruits, vegetables and fresh herbs; plain, naturally fermented yogurt, miso, and

sauerkraut.

Other ways to ensure fitness include:

- ▶ A good breakfast (whole grain cereals and breads, yogurt, nuts, eggs, and vegetables) sets the blood sugar tone for the day, lessens fatigue and flattens out those energy ups and downs.
- ▶ Good timing. Eating meals on a regular schedule improves energy and blood sugar control, lowers bad cholesterol, and burns more energy. Eating next to nothing for breakfast and lunch, followed by gorging at dinner can wear you out and make you fat.
- ▶ A balanced diet. Too many animal products slow down digestion and can lead to the toxin production that can trigger inflammation.

Chronic inflammation has many complicated causes, so if these self-help ideas don't solve it, a naturopath or nutritionally oriented, regulated health professional can help identify the pain sources, and the best way to control them.

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