Chronic, systemic inflammation has been linked to a number of diseases, including obesity, insulin resistance, depression, and cardiovascular disease. This type of inflammation is often due to long-term stress on the body, such as smoking, being overweight, an unhealthy diet, or a lack of physical activity. Current research suggests that, along with healthy lifestyle changes, diet can play an important role in reducing this inflammation.

In general, a diet high in whole, unprocessed foods like fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, and whole grains may help reduce inflammation. While no single food or nutrient is a “miracle food,” a healthy dietary pattern that emphasizes these foods may be sustainable and beneficial for long-term health.

Anti-Inflammatory Diet

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: These essential fatty acids, found in oily fish like salmon, mackerel, and sardines—as well as in smaller amounts in plant sources like flaxseed, walnuts, and algae—inhibit inflammatory pathways that contribute to chronic inflammation. While omega-6 fatty acids also play a necessary role in growth and development, they are pro-inflammatory—and it is this ratio of high omega-6s to low omega-3s that may contribute to inflammation and the high prevalence of chronic disease today.

Vitamin E: Vitamin E, which exists as multiple chemical structures, may help to reduce inflammation by scavenging free radicals and limiting lipid oxidation. Several studies have shown that vitamin E inhibits COX-2, an enzyme involved in inflammatory pathways; however, more studies should investigate the relationship between dietary intake of vitamin E and chronic inflammation.

Flavonoids: Flavonoids are a class of organic compounds found in plants. As micronutrients, many have been found to lower inflammation through a variety of mechanisms, including decreasing pro-inflammatory cytokine production and blocking pro-inflammatory pathways.

Probiotics: Known as the “good bacteria” that naturally reside in our gut, probiotics limit pro-inflammatory cytokines and modulate communication between the immune system in the brain. Specific strains of bacteria are associated with different health benefits.

Choose at least two servings of oil fish per week. If you’re vegetarian or vegan, consider an algae-based DHA supple-

Aim to eat a variety of nuts, seeds, and leafy greens every day.

Add as many vegetables and fruits to your diet as you like! Berries, green tea, spices, herbs, and cocoa are especially rich sources.

Probiotics can be found in yogurt, kefir, miso soup, and fermented vegetables. In yogurt, look for “live and active cultures on the label.
Foods That May Promote Inflammation

Other foods may be linked to inflammation within the body. As you might guess, foods that promote inflammation tend to be the opposite of whole and unprocessed: they are heavily processed and often contain added sugars and fats. If you’re aiming for a dietary pattern that reduces chronic inflammation, these are some foods and nutrients to limit:

Trans Fats: Trans fats are a type of industrially produced fat used to increase the shelf life and improve the consistency of a processed food product. In addition to promoting inflammation and damaging the lining of blood vessels, their consumption has been linked with an increased risk of obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes.

Sugars and refined carbohydrates: Excessive consumption of sugar and refined carbohydrates spur the production of advanced glycation end (AGE) products, which stimulate inflammation.

Excessive alcohol: Moderate alcohol consumption—1 drink a day for women and 2 for men—has been linked with improved health outcomes. But any more than that (especially binge drinking) promotes inflammation. When excessive alcohol is broken down by the liver, it produces damaging byproducts; over time, it also stresses the pancreas.

Processed meats: As with sugars, a high consumption of processed meats is linked with an increased production of inflammation-stimulating AGE products.

Avoid or limit foods that contain trans fats like commercially baked goods, deep-fried foods, shortening, and margarine. Also look out for the words partially hydrogenated or hydrogenated on ingredient labels.

Avoid or limit sugar-sweetened beverages (soda, fruit juice, sports drinks, and sweetened coffee beverages), which are the biggest contributors to added sugar intake. Also scan the ingredients panel for sources of added sugar.

Stick to one or two (for women and men, respectively) alcohol beverages per night. If you don’t drink right now, there’s no need to start—there’s not enough evidence to suggest that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Limit your intake of processed meats like hot dogs, sausages, bacon, high-fat deli meats, and jerky. Try to get some of your protein from plant-based sources, like beans or lentils, or add in anti-inflammatory oily fish.