

Inflammatory Foods are Misunderstood

Even healthy foods can be bad for you

Medium Wellness

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Do you love brussels sprouts, but find yourself a little gassy after eating them? Or maybe a lot gassy?

What about pizza? Does it give you heartburn? It's the tomato sauce, does it every time.

Or maybe cucumbers make you burp? That damn spa water, but it's so fancy.

It's possible you've had these symptoms, but hadn't connected them to food. Sometimes you get so used to physical ailments (gas, runny nose, indigestion), that you don't realize they're a distress signal.

More specifically, they're a sign that your body is rejecting what it's been fed and it's putting up a fight in your digestive system. War is happening in your bowels and it's causing inflammation in your intestines.

The way you win this war is by phasing out the foods that give you problems. Unfortunately, that probably includes some of your favorite foods.

As a chef, I get a lot of requests for non-inflammatory foods. To the average person, this may sound reasonable. But, as someone who follows food fads and health crazes, this request is not so straight forward.

There's no one bucket for inflammatory foods. We're all different, so our bodies respond differently to the same foods. Sure, everyone could stand to cut back on sugar and processed foods. But there's still a lot of confusion around what's good and bad for you.

The assumption that we're all supposed to avoid the same foods is ridiculous. That's like saying we should all avoid yoga pants, which is mostly true. Bad example.

You can't count on marketing savvy and food lobbyists to have your best interests in mind. What's considered healthy today, depends on its profitability.

In keeping with the American ethos, identifying inflammatory foods is an individual undertaking. Only you hold the key to your food sensitivities.

Inflammation What Now?

In a nutshell, inflammation is our body's natural defense against foreign organisms, such as bacteria and viruses. There are two types of inflammation: acute and chronic.

Acute inflammation comes and goes fairly quickly. Think of the last time you cut yourself. When it got red and swollen, that was the result of white blood cells coming to your rescue. Once the skin healed, your life went back to normal.

[Chronic inflammation](#) occurs when your immune system thinks it's under siege from foreign invaders, even though it's not. Associated diseases include arthritis and heart disease. This type of inflammation can last months or years. Possible [causes](#) include exposure to low-level toxic irritants, poor diet and chronic stress.



Am I Allergic?

How does this tie-in with food? When you [eat food](#) that your body doesn't like, it will treat it like a foreign intruder and start attacking it in your digestive system. Your body is defending itself, but what results is intestinal inflammation. If you continually eat foods that are harmful to your body, you run the risk of... you guessed it—chronic inflammation.

Let's clear up some terminology, before you hop on the anti-inflammatory foods bandwagon. Food intolerances, allergies and sensitivities are three different things.

[Food intolerances](#) are digestion-related, which means the body lacks certain enzymes to break down certain proteins. The most common example of this is lactose intolerance. The body is unable to break down milk proteins because it lacks the lactase enzyme. Some people may

choose to avoid milk and dairy products altogether, while others will ingest a form of the enzyme to aid in digestion (e.g., Lactaid).

Food allergies and sensitivities are due to an **overactive** immune system. Allergies are immediate, severe and can be life threatening (hives, anaphylactic shock). Common food allergies include: nuts, shellfish, eggs.

Food sensitivity symptoms are milder and can be delayed by hours or even days, depending on the amount of the suspect food eaten. Food sensitivities result in all kinds of symptoms, but they do not mean you are allergic. Some common symptoms include:

- Gas, bloating, cramps
- Sneezing, runny nose
- Headache, migraine
- Fatigue
- Joint or muscle pain

I'm the Sensitive One?

When people talk about inflammatory foods, they are talking about food sensitivities. The thing with food sensitivities is that they can be hard to pinpoint.

You may be thinking it's easy to get some kind of skin test or blood work done. But, most testing is geared toward allergies, **not sensitivities**.

If you're an adult, you probably know what you're allergic to by now. Remember, allergies are severe and don't just cause a tummy ache.

Food sensitivities are trickier. Their symptoms vary and can be easily confused for other health problems. The good news is, once you've cleaned up your diet, some food sensitivities can diminish over time. Your good foods list will always be in flux, and even some of your bad foods will convert to occasional indulgences.

If you have persistent digestive issues and want to try the "food is medicine" approach, start by eliminating processed foods.

I know I said there's no universal list of bad foods, but there is some consensus when it comes to processed foods. Here's a [list of inflammatory foods](#) that many doctors agree you should reduce or eliminate. Think of this as the "Obvious List":

- Sugar, corn syrup (soda, pastries)
- Refined carbohydrates (white breads, pasta)
- Fried foods and oils (corn and soybean oils)
- Trans fats (margarine, shortening)



Photo by Jennifer Schmidt

Help Me Help Myself

Once you've cut back on the "Obvious List," start incorporating more vegetables, fruits and whole grains. They will not only help heal your gut lining, but they will provide you with critical nutrients.

Now is the time to start paying attention to any symptoms during or after eating. This requires you to become a detective, because you've gotten used to your morning phlegm or your nightly heartburn. You've accepted them as a part of your life. It's time to question all your symptoms and see if you can find a food correlation.

It helps to keep track of food suspects by keeping a food diary. They're all innocent until proven guilty, but nothing should be ruled out. Nothing. You've got to be ruthless.

I have a dry erase board where I wrote four items over a month ago: avocado, pork, tomato, cauliflower. I didn't want to believe that these foods caused me problems, but deep down inside I knew they did (like, in my bowels).

This list was hard to accept because several of those items are touted as "health foods." Everybody's gone crazy for cauliflower, it's **the** carb substitute. It's used as rice, it's used as pizza crust, it's used in gnocchi, it's everywhere. Yet, I literally, can't stomach the stuff.

There are going to be hard truths you must face once you evaluate your diet. But, part of the reason why they're hard is because you've bought into the media blitz of what's healthy and trendy. Accept that there are healthy foods that are not good for you.

The Quest Never Ends

Now that you're off and running, playing detective in your own life story, remember to *also* focus on how much better you feel. Or you could remind yourself by eating something from your bad foods list. A lot of the time, one reminder is all you need. It's amazing how you got used to feeling crappy.

Over time, your body heals and changes, and so will your food sensitivities. This means food monitoring is never complete and is a lifelong endeavor. Once you've been doing it for a few weeks, it becomes second nature.

Your goal is to feed yourself the right foods to prevent chronic inflammation. Chronic inflammation is the underlying cause for many long-term diseases. Take your health into your own hands by paying attention to what you put into your mouth.