

How Does the Food You Eat Affect Your Pain?

Written by: Jason Racca, PT, DPT, CFMT, OCS

What does the food you choose to eat have anything to do with your physical therapy and pain? It seems like we have more options for food today than ever, and not all of it is good for us!

HOW DOES FOOD AFFECT YOUR PAIN?

There are a lot of theories on this, and starting to be more and more research. Ultimately this comes down to how food affects inflammation and bacteria in the gut! We will look at a few of those theories, but first a bit about our gut bacteria.

THE MICROBIOME AND INFLAMMATION

In our gut (intestines) are trillions of tiny bacteria. All of these bacteria living in there together make up what is called our microbiome. These bacteria have a purpose. The healthier your microbiome is the healthier you are!

Approximately 70% of your immune system is in your gut! That means if your gut is not healthy, *you* are not healthy. An unhealthy gut can lead to a number of problems, most resulting in increased inflammation in your body! Increasing inflammation can lead to increased pain. So if we bring this conversation back to food for a moment, what goes into your mouth, goes into your gut to feed the bacteria. If the foods you choose feed the healthy bacteria, you tend to be healthier!



FOODS AND THE BACTERIA

There are some foods that are more damaging to your microbiome than others, and they are in abundant supply today! In fact, they are the majority of what we, in a western culture, eat!

REFINED SUGARS

This can be one of the most damaging things for your gut bacteria, and ultimately for managing inflammation effectively. This is more than just candy or “sweet snacks.” A lot of breads, foods with grains, and processed foods have refined sugar. This helps create an environment that the “bad” bacteria can thrive. There is even research that shows that your immune system is affected immediately after eating sugars!

GLUTEN

Maybe you thought this was one of those “fad diets.” In reality, gluten can be very damaging to your gut lining! It causes a reaction that leads to gut permeability (substances leak from the gut that are not meant to.) You will find gluten mainly in wheat and grain products, but it can be a hidden additive in other foods as well! It really comes down to the way our wheat is produced in the last few decades. (There are plenty of resources to read more on this. Two great books on this are *Wheat Belly* by Dr. William Davis, and *Grain Brain* by Dr. David Perlmutter. His website is: www.drperlmutter.com)

GLYPHOSATE

If you haven't heard about glyphosate by that name, you probably know it as a prominent ingredient in a popular herbicide called Round Up. Glyphosate has been linked to many health problems that we see in our culture including: gastrointestinal disorders, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, autism, fertility issues, and even Alzheimer's. A common denominator for many of these diseases is inflammation.



=

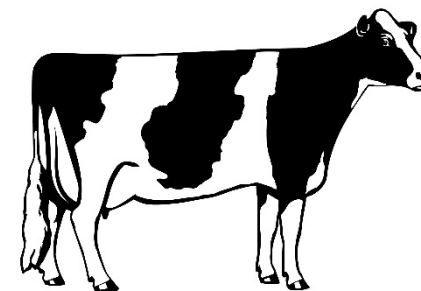


GMO's

Genetically Modified Organisms. This is becoming more prevalent. In fact, the United States is one of the leading producers of GMO foods. It sounds good in theory: More food produced inexpensively, which means more food to help with the hunger epidemic around the world. The down side to GMO is this: many GMO's were created and modified in a way to be able to withstand pesticides without killing the plant. This comes back to the glyphosate conversation. One of the first GMO foods produced was called “Round Up Ready.” So the genetic make-up of the food is changed (and not well studied for long term effects on human consumption), and now it is grown in a way that more pesticide/herbicide can be sprayed on it!

DAIRY

For some, this will be a factor. Of course there are those people that are lactose intolerant. But for those that are not lactose intolerant, this can still play a role. Dairy (Cow's milk) is one of the more common food allergies, and it can be a source inflammation for some. This may manifest in gastrointestinal discomfort, eczema, and any number of other symptoms. It may be worth a trial of eliminating this.



HOW CAN I HELP MY PAIN WITH FOOD?

Now that we have skimmed the surface on the negative affects some foods have on the microbiome, let's look at some positive aspects.

FEED YOUR GUT WHAT IT NEEDS!

There are some foods that are more “anti-inflammatory” by design. And then there are foods that overall help to promote a healthy balance in your gut bacteria, and ultimately help lower inflammation in your body. These are the foods we need to be eating more! But first we have to stop the damage!

STEP 1:

ELIMINATE THE DAMAGING FOODS!

Just like for a “physical pain” it is wise to stop doing the things that aggravate the pain, it is important to *stop* eating the foods that are damaging our guts and increasing inflammation!

Practically, it will be hard to eliminate everything all at once. And there are a lot of factors that play a role, such as family dynamics, access to better foods, finances, etc. Try a little change at a time. One month try decreasing refined sugar in take and note any changes. Next, maybe add taking out gluten. It will be a process to eliminate the damaging factors. You are just starting your journey. I personally have taken 3-4 years for my journey in eliminating things and changing eating habits. But positive changes did not take that long!

Limit refined sugars: Limiting your intake of these can greatly help your immune system by keeping your gut happier. Remember, these are things like candy, cookies, breads, pastries, etc.

Eliminate GMO's: There are a lot of politics behind this right now in trying to make food companies label foods that are genetically modified. There are more and more companies that are voluntarily putting a label on that says “GMO Free Project Verified.” Look for products with this label on them. The most commonly genetically modified foods are **soy, corn, and canola oil**. By eliminating as many of these as you can you will be cutting back on the intake of pesticides/herbicides.



Eliminate Gluten: For some, this can be a big change that helps you to feel better. Even if you are not “gluten intolerant” or “gluten sensitive,” the reaction that gluten causes in the gut can lead to gut permeability (leaky gut). Your intestines are designed to let some things through, but not all. If they become more permeable, your body will start to attack the “foreign” substances that are not meant to be there. Then you start having more of an “auto-immune” situation and increase in inflammation.

STEP 2:

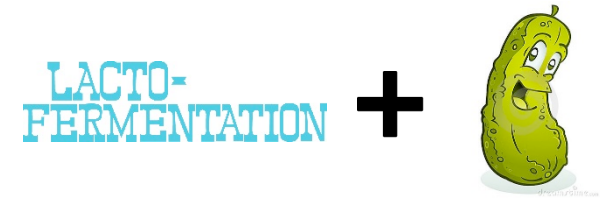
ADD IN MORE HEALING/ANTI-INFLAMMATORY FOODS

Again, this will be a process, start slowly. There is no way I can cover all aspects of this in this short write-up.

Organic and/or locally grown: If you can afford it, start buying **organic** foods or **locally grown** foods when you can. Start with the most heavily sprayed (with pesticides) foods. Locally grown foods are less likely to have preservatives because they do not have to travel far and stay fresh. There is a list of foods known as “the dirty dozen,” and another list known as “the clean fifteen.” The “dirty dozen” is the 12 foods that tend to be most heavily sprayed and more likely to absorb the pesticides. These tend to be porous foods like peaches, apples, potatoes. It does not mean they are completely pesticide free, but it will start to decrease your intake of this and decrease the burden to your gut. The “clean fifteen” tend to be foods that are sprayed less, or tend to be less likely to absorb this. These are foods that tend to have harder shells or thick linings, such as: onions, avocado, pineapple, etc. If finances are an issue with eating healthier, than start with buying organic on the foods most likely to have “bad stuff” on them.



Fermented Foods: These can be very helpful in providing good probiotic bacteria. Things like sauerkraut, kimchi, fermented pickles, kefir and kombucha drinks (read the labels and watch the sugar content).



Omega-3's: Our diets in western cultures are largely foods that have Omega-6 fatty acids and very little Omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acids are foods that **decrease inflammation!** Omega-6 fatty acids are important to have, but too much can tend to increase inflammation. The proper ratio of Omega-6 to Omega-3 is recommended to be 4 to 1. In most western diets, the ratio is 30 to 1! Try to eat more foods with Omega-3 fatty acids: Flaxseeds, chia, hemp, walnuts, Alaskan Salmon, Pacific Sardines, and chunk light tuna.

STEP 3:

CONSIDER SUPPLEMENTING IF APPROPRIATE

It is always best, in my opinion, to get as many nutrients as you can from whole foods. However, sometimes we need help for various reasons.

Here is a list of supplements that would be worth considering. *Please talk with your healthcare provider about these first:*

Probiotics, natural anti-inflammatories (tart cherry juice concentrate, turmeric, curcumin, bromelain, boswellia, fish oil, essential oils, vitamin D, and more.) These can be dose dependent, so speak with a knowledgeable practitioner.

There are some supplements designed to help heal and protect the gut lining as well: collagen protein and bone broth are two.

Remember, this is a journey. It will take a little change at a time. Do not get overwhelmed, your health is worth it!