What do paper cuts, spicy foods, stubbed toes and intense workouts at the gym have to do with your odds of getting colon cancer, drifting into Alzheimer’s or succumbing to a heart attack? A lot more than you might think.

The more scientists learn about these and other serious diseases, the more they are being linked with the long-term effects of inflammation on the body.

The inflammation-disease connection has become a hot research topic. And it’s about to explode.

**Vital Nuisance**

Inflammation is a vital immune response to infection, injury or irritation. It is the basis of humanity’s earliest survival.

It’s what causes the redness in that paper cut—the result of extra blood walling off the area and rushing macrophages, histamine and other bacteria-fighting immune factors to the wound.

The same inflammatory process is what makes your throat burn when you decide to impress your friends by chugging the extra-spicy suicide sauce—blood vessels leak fluid, proteins and cells to repair or remove damaged tissues. And fever is yet another form of that inflammatory burning.

Inflammation sparks the swelling in that stubbed toe—caused by fluid released into the banged-up cells to speed healing and cushion that toe against further injury.

It also causes that tenderness you feel after hours at the gym—because your immune system rushes fluids to the torn muscles to protect and repair them, compressing sensitive nerve endings in the process.

Inflammation isolates foreign invaders and rushes our strongest natural infection-fighters to the site deemed under attack. It cleans away debris from destroyed tissue; slows bleeding; starts clotting; and—if tissues cannot be restored—produces scar tissue. Without this sophisticated immune response, our species would have died out long ago.

But it’s a double-edged sword. In addition to its telltale redness, heat, swelling or pain, inflammation can cause serious dysfunction.

Problems begin when—for one reason or another—the inflammatory process becomes chronic, persisting long after it’s needed.

Heart disease researchers were the first to notice that inflammation can play a role in cardiovascular disease.
Heart Mystery
Not long ago, doctors viewed heart disease as a plumbing problem. Cholesterol levels in the blood get too high, and, over the years, fatty deposits clog the pipes and cut off the blood supply.

There's just one problem with that explanation: Sometimes, it's dead wrong.

Half of all heart attacks occur in people with normal cholesterol levels and normal blood pressure. Something causes relatively minor deposits to burst, triggering massive clots that block the blood supply.

That something has turned out to be inflammation.

C-reactive protein (CRP)—a blood measure of inflammation—shoots up during an acute illness or infection. But CRP is also somewhat elevated among otherwise healthy people. And studies show that those with the highest CRP levels have three times the heart attack risk as those with the lowest levels.

The inflammatory response, possibly reacting to cholesterol that has seeped into the lining of the artery, makes even normal fatty deposits unstable.

There are several causes of heart disease: smoking, high blood pressure and, yes, cholesterol. But we must now add inflammation to that list.

Runaway Reaction
Heart disease is just the tip of the inflammation iceberg. Studies over the past couple of years have suggested that higher CRP levels raise the risk of diabetes. It’s too early to say whether lowering inflammation will keep diabetes from developing.

But before insulin was isolated at the University of Toronto in the 1920s, doctors found that blood sugar levels could be decreased by using salicylates, a group of aspirin-like compounds known to reduce inflammation.

In the 1860s, German pathologist Rudolph Virchow speculated that cancerous tumors start at the site of chronic inflammation—basically, a wound that never heals. Then, in the middle of the 20th century, we came to understand the role of genetic mutations in cancerous tissue. Today, researchers are investigating the possibility that mutations and inflammation work together to turn normal cells into deadly tumors. Reducing chronic inflammation may yet become a prescription for keeping cancer at bay.

Defensive Nutrition
- oily fish and fish oil supplements
- olive, walnut or flaxseed oil
- walnuts, flaxseeds and soy foods
- fruits and vegetables
- red wine
- antioxidant supplements
- garlic, ginger and turmeric (curcumin)
- sunflower seeds, eggs, herring, nuts or zinc tablets
- pineapple or bromelain supplements
- S-adenosyl-methionine (SAMe)

Researchers have found that people who take anti-inflammatory medications—for arthritis, for example—suffer from Alzheimer's disease later in life than those who don't. Plaque and tangles accumulate in the brains of Alzheimer's patients. Perhaps the immune system mistakenly sees these abnormalities as damaged tissue that should be eliminated. Early information suggests that low-dose aspirin and fish oil capsules—both known to reduce inflammation—lower the risk of Alzheimer's.

The cause of asthma is still unknown, but some suspect the inflammatory attack. The treatments that help relieve asthma work by reducing the inflammation involved.

Sometimes, for reasons that are not clear, perfectly healthy cells trigger the body's immune system. The inflammatory response is launched against normal cells in the joints, nerves, connective tissue or any part of the body. These autoimmune disorders include rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, lupus, vitiligo, psoriasis and other versions of the body at war with itself. Even Crohn's disease and cystic fibrosis are associated with inflammation.

Some level of inflammatory immune reaction is usually present in our bodies, whether we're aware of it or not. And if inflammation really is the biological engine that drives many of our most feared illnesses, it suggests a new and possibly much simpler way of warding off disease. Instead of different treatments for all of these disorders, simply turning down the degree of our inflammatory attack might be a partial prevention for all of them.

Dampening the Fires
Many attributes of a Western lifestyle—such as a diet high in sugars and saturated fats, accompanied by little or no exercise—make it much easier for the body to become inflamed.

Losing weight helps because fat cells produce cytokines, which crank up inflammation. Thirty minutes a day of moderate exercise dampens the fire as well. Flossing your teeth combats gum disease, another source of chronic inflammation. And, of course, you should avoid excess alcohol intake and smoking.

Despite the injury they can do to the stomach, anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen are often prescribed for treatment of inflammatory diseases, but they're not appropriate for prevention. Fish
oil capsules have been shown to produce the same reduction in inflammatory cytokines.

Inflammation-promoting prosta-
glandins are made from the trans fats found in partially hydrogenated oils. So avoid margarines and vege-
table shortenings that are made with them.

Getting a good supply of omega-3 fatty acids—and a minimum of omega-6 fats—is key to an immune system that's not overreactive. Opt for oily fish such as salmon, sardines, herring and mackerel; and on days that you don't have fish, take a fish oil supplement. Eat walnuts, freshly ground flaxseeds or flaxseed oil and soy foods. Steer away from safflower, sunflower, corn and sesame oils, as well as polyunsaturated vegetable oils. Use walnut, flaxseed or extra virgin olive oils instead.

Fruits and vegetables are full of antioxidants that disable free radicals and minimize inflammation. All are good, but you should focus your diet on those that produce the highest antioxidant activity: blueberries and kiwi. Consider antioxidant supplements such as resveratrol, grape seed extract, quercetin, pycnogenol or citrus bioflavonoids, as well as beta-carotene and vitamins C and E. And drink red wine in small quantities.

Garlic, ginger and turmeric are natural anti-inflammatory agents. Include them in your diet.

Zinc controls inflammation while promoting healing. It is found in sunflower seeds, eggs, nuts, wheat germ, herring and zinc supplements.

S-adenosyl-methionine (SAMe), alpha lipoic acid and coenzyme Q10 act as inflammation fighters. Also, bromelain—found in pineapple and supplements—may reduce inflammation.

So if you want to stop inflammation, get off that couch and head out to pick up oily fish, fresh produce, garlic and supplements. And try not to stub your toe on the way.

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