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Eat to Beat Joint Inflammation

Cancer, heart disease, obesity – these are three of the most common, serious health problems in the United States. Know what they all may have in common? Inflammation. That's right, the same joint inflammation that causes arthritis may be associated with other health problems, and your eating habits can play a big role in reducing inflammation and helping all of those conditions.

Scientists know that the enzymes cyclooxygenase-1 (COX-1) and 2 (COX-2) are major causes of joint inflammation; that's why you may take medications – such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which block COX-1 and COX-2 enzymes, or COX-2 inhibitors – to treat your arthritis. Researchers have learned that COX-2 enzymes become more active and cause more joint inflammation when you take in more omega-6 fatty acids than omega-3 fatty acids.

Omega-6 fatty acids are found in corn, sunflower, safflower, soybean and cottonseed oil and are prevalent in many snack foods, fried foods, margarines and other spreads. (They're also in egg yolks and meats.) In fact, many of the foods people overindulge in during "snack attacks" are linked to increasing joint inflammation and obesity. Interestingly, inflammation is connected to obesity – and obesity to arthritis – because fat cells can produce cytokines – proteins that encourage inflammation.

What can you do? Add more veggies, fruit, nuts, tea and even chocolate to your diet. Many plant-based foods contain antioxidants and phytochemicals, both of which may decrease the activity of the COX-2 enzyme, reducing joint inflammation. And don't forget to load up on omega-3 fatty acids, found in fatty fish such as salmon and tuna.