Can Food Heal?

Anti-inflammatory diet can help prevent inflammation-related disease

When you get a cut, you might cover it up with a bandage. When you have muscle pain, you might take an ibuprofen. But is it possible that the foods you eat can also help you heal and prevent disease?

"Your food choices are just as important as the medications and supplements you take for overall health since they can protect against inflammation," says Christopher Suhar, MD, medical director of the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine and a cardiologist at Scripps Clinic.

What is inflammation?

Inflammation occurs when the immune system cells that guard against infection and repair injury begin to attack healthy arteries, organs and joints.

Inflammation is a factor in several chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, obesity, cancer, Alzheimer's disease and various autoimmune diseases.

An anti-inflammatory diet — along with lifestyle changes — can significantly influence your health and may help prevent inflammation-related disease.

Anti-inflammatory foods that can help reduce inflammation include:

- Omega-3 fats (salmon, tuna and walnuts)
- Antioxidants (sweet potatoes, blueberries and spinach)
- Probiotics (yogurt, miso and sauerkraut)
- Fiber (artichoke, black beans and apples)

An anti-inflammatory diet also limits foods that promote inflammation, including:

- Trans fats
- Saturated fats
- High levels of omega-6 fats (corn oil, grapeseed oil and peanut oil)

The Mediterranean diet is an example of an anti-inflammatory diet, with its focus on fruits, vegetables, fish and whole grains, and limits on unhealthy fats, such as red meat, butter and egg yolks, as well as processed and refined sugars and carbs.

Meals as anti-inflammation medicine

"When you eat more omega-3 rich foods and whole foods, and minimize processed foods, you lower your levels of inflammation, and provide your body with beneficial vitamins and nutrients that help with the prevention of disease," Dr. Suhar says.

Adding more omega-3 fats to your diet can also help reduce stress. Potassium-rich foods and low-sodium foods can help regulate blood pressure.

Since most of us eat three to five meals a day, it's important to be mindful about what foods we're eating to fuel our energy levels and keep our minds and bodies functioning at their best, Dr. Suhar says.

"Food is just as important to your health as other lifestyle factors," Dr. Suhar says. "It's important to understand how food can affect your body and how you feel, and use that information to guide your food choices."