

Men's Health: Nutritional Considerations

By Dr. David Seaman

Several health issues predominate in men as they age including the metabolic syndrome, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, depression, erectile dysfunction, prostate hypertrophy (enlargement) and cancer, and loss of muscle mass and vitality. In many cases, medications are prescribed for these conditions: for example, metformin for metabolic syndrome, diuretics and ACE inhibitors for hypertension, and statins for elevated cholesterol. It is important to understand that these conditions often cluster in patients; in other words, many patients suffer from all of these conditions at once, leading to multiple health issues (and multiple medications). Also notable is that many of these patients are only in their 40s.

Most 40-year-old men who manifest these conditions are substantially different physical specimens compared to when they were in high school or college. A lean 6 footer weighing 170 pounds at age 20 will often weigh 220 pounds or more by age 40. The majority of that additional weight is in the form of fat, and its deposition often developed as a consequence of two simple things: overeating and a lack of exercise.



The additional fat mass that men collect as they age should be viewed as a "mass of inflammation." Interestingly, white blood cells collect in excess fat tissue and begin to release inflammatory chemicals into circulation. Fat cells also release various inflammatory chemicals.

The outcome is that the man becomes generally inflamed, which can be quantified by measuring the C-reactive protein level with a simple blood test. As mentioned, multiple metabolic changes take place due to the inflammatory state, including atherosclerosis, depression, hypertension, erectile dysfunction, prostate hypertrophy, and reduced vitality.

While medications are sometimes beneficial in addressing the primary symptoms of these conditions, in general they cannot correct the problem, because the problem is caused by overeating and a lack of exercise. The good news is that the correction simply requires doing what we already know is good for us. That is, we need to exercise more and eat better, and research has demonstrated that the combination of exercising and eating nutrient-rich foods that are low in calories can lead to rapid fat loss and a reduction of chronic inflammation.

While this approach is obviously simple in application, there is inherent difficulty for many when trying to change dietary behaviors, especially if they have persisted for years. Sticking to eating healthy food is a challenge; however, consider the pro-inflammatory consequences that make a nightmare of the middle-age years, and one might well be motivated to practice a little prevention and avoid the dire health consequences later.

The best foods to focus on when pursuing an anti-inflammatory diet are fish, lean animal proteins, vegetables, fruits, sweet potatoes, and nuts. Certain supplements are also beneficial for reducing chronic inflammation, especially magnesium, omega-3 fish oil, and vitamin D.

The typical recommended level of supplemental magnesium is 400 mg per day. Fish oil is more complicated because we want to get 1,000-3,000 mg of EPA/DHA per day. EPA/DHA are the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil. In general, each fish oil capsule contains 1,000 more milligrams of oil; however, you must make sure the supplement includes 1,000 mg of the combination of EPA/DHA.

Vitamin D supplementation has become very popular in recent years. We need about 4,000 IU per day to maintain proper blood levels. In the summer months, supplementation is not necessary if one gets adequate sun exposure. It is best to get your vitamin D level tested to determine if 4,000 IU is enough for you. When considering any supplementation, it's always best to talk to your doctor first, particularly if you are currently taking medication, as some medications may interact with nutritional supplements.

Many men notice a positive change in their health status within a week if they adhere to the dietary and supplemental changes, and as time goes on, many who are taking medication for one or more of the above conditions are able to discontinue their medication. The focus should be on pursuing an anti-inflammatory lifestyle and letting your body respond as it sees fit. It's actually a simple process: Before preparing, ordering or eating a food, test yourself by asking the following question: "Will this food increase or decrease inflammation?" If it increases inflammation, you may want to avoid it or certainly limit consumption. If it decreases inflammation, then dig in! Talk to your doctor for more information.

Are You Promoting Good Health or Preventing It?

Many of the common health conditions that affect men are attributable to inflammation; as such, a prudent measure to reduce your disease risk is to consume a diet rich in anti-inflammatory foods and sparse in pro-inflammatory ones. Here are a few examples from each category (exceptions may apply):



Pro-Inflammatory Foods

Sugary, processed foods

Refined oils

Refined grains

Fatty meat



Anti-Inflammatory Foods:

Vegetables

Fruits

Raw nuts and seeds

Potatoes

Lean meat (chicken, fish)



Quick Facts About Men's Health

When it comes to men's health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers these sobering statistics:

12% ages 18 and older are considered in "**fair**" or "**poor**" health

34% ages 18 and older participate in **leisure-time physical activity** regularly

32% ages 20 and older are **obese**

31% ages 20 and older have hypertension (**high blood pressure**)

Source: CDC FastStats: Men's Health. www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/mens_health.htm.

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