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## Prevent Autoimmunity, Turn Off Inflammation!

could present as inflamed joints, skin rashes, anemia, fever, or fatigue.

Diagnosing inflammation and autoimmunity is done by obtaining a medical history, doing a physical exam, and ordering blood tests like ESR, CRP and antibodies called RF and ANA. Interestingly enough, in the last decade, extensive research has concluded that inflammation is a major contributing factor in many conditions previously considered benign, such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease, and dementia. Even more interesting: new research shows that high-intensity inflammation correlates with higher disease activity.

Hundreds of mind-body based research studies suggest intense mental or physical stress, lack of sleep, processed food allergens, and chronic infections cause "second hit phenomenon." This means that, in genetically predisposed individuals, these triggers will precipitate autoimmune diseases. Identifying and neutralizing environmental and nutritional allergies and lowering a person's antigenic load can help down-regulate inflammation and the risk of autoimmunity.

As a rheumatologist, I see many faces of inflammation and autoimmunity. Rheumatoid Arthritis is the most-common autoimmune arthritis. RA affects about 1% of population and presents as swollen and painful joints. If RA is left untreated, it can cause permanent joint destruction within 2 years and can cause internal organ damage. The integrative medicine approach blames the industrialized world, since processed food proteins put a heavy

antigenic load on our intestinal immune systems. Processed food also changes the healthy balance of bowel flora (bacteria), leading to leaky gut. This microbial imbalance leads to increased free radical formation and inflammation of joints.

My integrative interventions focus on reducing antigenic triggers, balancing inflammatory mediators, and restoring healthy flora in the gut. This approach halts inflammation and prevents autoimmunity from going wild. I also encourage reducing unhealthy levels of emotional and physical stress through meditation, yoga, and exercise. This approach can help us become stronger, more youthful, and free of inflammation.

The nutritional intervention I recommend is a Mediterranean diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, and extra virgin olive oil, which can increase omega 3 fatty acid in the body. Wild-water salmon, mackerel, and sardines are rich in omega 3FA. Avocados and flaxseeds are plant-based sources of omega 3s.

It also helps to avoid food triggers. Listen to your body's clues: if you feel pain and become inflamed

after eating certain foods, avoid them to test the theory. Some studies have suggested eliminating common food allergens, including gluten, dairy, beef, pork, and eggs for an initial 2-week period. Adopting a vegan diet results in significant reductions in antibodies to gluten and other foods and helped people improve joint pain and inflammation. Avoid excessive coffee and tobacco cessation reduces RA disease activity.

Here is a list of supplements found helpful in RA:

- Omega-3 fatty acids to reduce inflammatory mediators like EPA and DHA (2-3 g/day)
- GLA (1.5-3 g/day)
- Conjugated linoleic acid (2-3 g/day)
- Antioxidants help reduce free oxygen radical damage
- Vitamin E8 (100 units as mixed tocopherols)
- Selenium (400 mcg/day)
- Calcium (1000-1200 mg/day)
- Magnesium (400-750 mg/day)
- Vitamin D (2000 I.U./day)
- Botanicals and probiotics to help maintain healthy gut flora and reduce pain
- Ginger (1 g 2-3 times/day)
- Turmeric (500 mg to 1000 mg 2-3 times/day) to help reduce inflammation

I also encourage you to introduce gradual but regular exercise into your daily routine to improve joint function, reduce pain, and improve muscle strength. Yoga, Pilates, and tai chi with stretching exercises prevent contractures. Use of physical and occupational therapy can be very helpful in avoiding deformities seen in RA. In conclusion, you have many tools to turn off inflammation in your body, so start today! You can soon feel energized, youthful, and pain free.

Let's discuss the role of the immune system in developing autoimmune diseases. As you know, the immune system is the defense system that protects us from day-to-day threats such as infections and allergens. It even helps us fight serious cancers. Unfortunately, in some cases, the immune system can turn against our own body, usually when we are exposed to unwanted environmental triggers or have undiagnosed infections. In such situations, our immune cells are stimulated by these noxious stimuli and become hyperactive.

Scientists believe that this disorderly hyperactive immune response, which I call the "ADHD" of our immune system, leads to production of chemicals called cytokines, cause destructive chemical reactions. This array of chemical processes leaves us with a pathologic and compromised immunity and an inflamed body. As I tell my patients, this is like a tsunami of cytokines spreading across our body. It can reach every cell and tissue, and, depending upon the DNA of the culprit agent, our immune cells will target tissues and organs. This process leads to cellular and DNA damage and also joint damage or organ failure. It

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**Dr. Farhan Tahir, MD** is board certified in **American Board of Internal Medicine, Rheumatology and Integrative & Holistic Medicine.** He is a member of **American College of Rheumatology and founder of Pennsylvania's first and only integrative rheumatology practice.** He lives in Bucks County with his wife and three young boys. For a personal integrative consultation, call 267-685-6070 or visit [www.RheumPA.com](http://www.RheumPA.com).

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