



The truth about inflammation (and what the research actually says)

You have probably seen the word "inflammation" on a supplement label, in a cookbook subtitle, or attached to a list of foods you are supposed to avoid. It has become one of wellness culture's most diluted terms, applied to everything from joint pain to brain fog to weight gain, usually with a product nearby that promises to address it. The result is that a lot of people now have strong feelings about inflammation without a particularly clear picture of what it actually is, or what the research on diet actually shows.

The biological reality is more interesting than the marketing version. Inflammation is not inherently a problem. It is a core part of how the immune system responds to injury, infection, and other threats, bringing blood flow and immune cells to where they are needed, clearing damaged tissue, and initiating repair. When you sprain an ankle and it swells, that is inflammation doing exactly what it is supposed to do. The concern is a specific kind: chronic, low-grade immune activation that persists over time because the underlying conditions driving it do not resolve. That pattern, sustained over years, is associated with cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers, which makes it worth understanding even if the commercial version of the story bears little resemblance to the actual science.

The wellness version of the story presents inflammation almost like a switch, with certain foods turning it on and others turning it off, and that framing is tidy enough to sell a lot of products.

But that does not hold up well against the research. The science on diet and chronic inflammation does not isolate individual foods as the primary drivers. It points to overall dietary patterns, sustained over time. A single meal does not meaningfully shift inflammatory markers in a healthy person. What shifts them, over months and years, is the cumulative character of what someone habitually eats, which is a less dramatic, but more accurate, story.

The patterns most consistently associated with lower inflammatory markers are the ones that will not surprise you: diets built around vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and fresh fish. The Mediterranean dietary pattern has the strongest evidence base, and it is worth noting that it is defined primarily by what it includes rather than what it excludes. Dietary patterns high in ultra-processed foods, refined grains, added sugar, and red and processed meat show the opposite association, again over time and as a pattern, not meal by meal.

The practical upshot is simpler than it is often made to sound. If your overall diet is built around whole, minimally processed foods and you eat a wide variety of them consistently, you are doing what the evidence supports. No single food will undo that, and no supplement will replicate it.

Bottom line: Focus less on which foods to avoid and more on building a way of eating that actually holds up over time. That shift alone puts you ahead of most of the nutrition advice out there.

Lentil Tabbouleh



This is a nutrient-dense, herb-forward take on the classic Middle Eastern bulgur wheat salad, with French green lentils adding substance and a pleasant bite. This works as a main dish or a generous side, and it keeps well covered in the fridge for several days.

Ingredients (serves 4):

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup French green lentils, rinsed
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fine bulgur
- 1 cup boiling water
- 2 cups fresh flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped (about 2 large bunches)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh mint, finely chopped
- 4 scallions, thinly sliced
- 2 medium tomatoes, seeded and finely diced
- 1 medium cucumber, seeded and finely diced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, plus more to taste
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, plus more to taste (omit if you're on a low-sodium diet)
- Black pepper to taste

Instructions:

1. Cook the lentils in a generous amount of salted water until just tender but still holding their shape, about 20 to 25 minutes. You want them cooked through but not at all mushy. Drain, rinse briefly under cold water to stop the cooking, and spread on a plate or sheet pan to cool completely.
2. While the lentils cook, place the bulgur in a bowl and pour the boiling water over it. Cover and let sit for about 15 minutes until the water is absorbed and the bulgur is tender. Fluff with a fork and let cool.
3. Combine the cooled lentils and bulgur in a large bowl with the parsley, mint, scallions, tomatoes, and cucumber. Dress with the olive oil and lemon juice, season with salt and pepper, and toss well. Taste and adjust, keeping in mind that tabbouleh should be assertively lemony and herby. More lemon is almost always the right call.
4. Serve at room temperature. The salad keeps well refrigerated for up to 3 days.

Notes: French green lentils hold their shape and have a firm, slightly peppery bite that works well here. Brown lentils are a fine substitute and considerably more affordable; just watch them closely as they cook since they soften faster and can go from done to mushy quickly, and reduce the cooking time to about 15 to 18 minutes. For a gluten-free version, quinoa makes a good swap for the bulgur: use $\frac{1}{2}$ cup dry quinoa cooked in 1 cup water, cooled completely before adding.