

CALMING INFLAMMATION FOR A HEALTHIER HEART

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

February is National Heart Health Month and a great time to reflect on all our heart does for us and show it some love.

Your heart is an amazing muscle, beating 24/7, and moving oxygen and nutrients to every corner of your body. Given how much it does, it's not surprising that heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States.

Most of us know the usual suspects when it comes to heart health: cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar, smoking, activity, and sleep. All of these matter. But there's another piece of the puzzle that has moved from "interesting" to "important:" inflammation.

We've long known that inflammation is linked to heart disease, but it has more recently been identified as a driver of heart disease, not just a bystander. Inflammation is the body's natural response to injury and infection, helping us heal. The issue arises when inflammation switches to low levels of chronic "smoldering" inflammation. This not only drives heart disease, but has also been identified as an underlying factor in many other chronic conditions, including diabetes and metabolic dysfunction.

A New Number to Know: hs-CRP

In 2025, the American College of Cardiology (ACC) released a scientific statement on inflammation and cardiovascular disease, emphasizing that the evidence linking chronic inflammation to cardiovascular risk is now strong enough that it should be measured and addressed as part of prevention.

One of the most practical tools is a blood test called hs-CRP (high-sensitivity C-reactive protein). CRP is a protein your body produces in response to inflammation. The ACC statement supports hs-CRP screening for almost everyone, including people without known heart disease, alongside traditional markers like cholesterol and blood pressure. Because hs-CRP can rise temporarily with an infection, injury, or another inflammatory condition, it's best interpreted when you're feeling well and sometimes repeated if it's elevated.

Here's a simple interpretation guide for hs-CRP (mg/L):

- < 1 = low risk
- 1-3 = intermediate risk
- > 3 = high risk

Of course, a blood test is never the whole story and doesn't replace your clinician's advice, but it can be a useful conversation starter: "Would hs-CRP be helpful for me, in addition to cholesterol and blood pressure measurements?"

8 Ways to Reduce Inflammation & Support Heart Health

The good news is there are many lifestyle factors that help support heart health AND decrease chronic inflammation. Here are some of the most impactful:

- **Follow a Mediterranean Diet** A Mediterranean-style eating pattern is one of the most well-studied approaches for heart health and inflammation. It emphasizes vegetables, fruit, beans/lentils, whole grains, nuts, seeds, extra-virgin olive oil, and seafood, while limiting ultra-processed foods and excess added sugar. You don't have to be perfect for it to help—small shifts in this direction can make a difference.
- **Add in fermented foods** Fermented foods can help improve gut microbe balance, strengthen the gut barrier, and produce compounds that support a healthier inflammatory response. One study found that participants eating more fermented foods showed a decrease in 19 different inflammatory markers! Readily available options include yogurt or kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, and kombucha.





- **Polyphenols for the win!** Polyphenols are plant compounds found in many plants, including berries, apples, broccoli, green tea, dark chocolate, extra-virgin olive oil, and nuts. They help to suppress inflammation by neutralizing free radicals, supporting the lining of blood vessels, and influencing gut microbes beneficially. The simplest way to think about polyphenols: the more plants (and the more colorful), the better!
- **Get plenty of omega-3 fatty acids** Omega-3s, found in fatty fish (think “SMASH”: Salmon, Mackerel, Anchovies, Sardines, Herring) as well as walnuts, chia seeds, and flaxseeds, help reduce inflammation, lower triglycerides, and improve arterial function. If you’re not a fish person, aim for plant-based sources regularly, and discuss with your clinician whether a supplement is necessary.
- **Don’t neglect oral health** Gingivitis and periodontal disease are big drivers of inflammation. This is one of those “under-appreciated” areas of health—gum inflammation is still inflammation. Brushing, flossing, and dental cleanings can make a real difference in inflammatory load over time.
- **Spend time outside** We all know intuitively that spending time outside and in greenery is good for us. But there’s also some interesting research behind it. In one recent study called the Green Heart Project, researchers planted thousands of trees and shrubs in an urban neighborhood and followed residents over time. They took blood samples before and after the neighborhood was “greened.” What did they find? After 4 years, residents in the tree area had decrease in levels of inflammation levels by up to 20% without any other interventions!
- **Spices can help too** From oregano to black pepper, many spices help decrease inflammation, and honestly, you could make the argument that most (if not all) spices have some potential benefit. There are some spices that are particularly well studied, and these include turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and black pepper.

What will you do to reduce inflammation and support heart health?

GOLDEN MILK RECIPE

Here is a recipe for Golden Milk, which not only uses all those spices but is also delicious.

GOLDEN MILK SPICE MIX

Ingredients:

- 1/4 cup turmeric
- 2 Tbsp ground ginger
- 2 Tbsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp cardamom
- 1 tsp ground black pepper
- 1/2 tsp cloves

Mix all spices together and store in an airtight container away from heat and light.

GOLDEN MILK (SERVES 1)

- 1 cup coconut, soy, or almond milk
- 1–2 tsp Golden Milk spice mix
- Optional: 1 tsp honey or maple syrup, 1/2 tsp vanilla

Warm the milk gently, whisk in the spice mix, and heat for 2–3 minutes, and enjoy!



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