

Module 6, Lesson 2 Handout:
Autoimmune Disease Food Swaps

Nutrition plays a huge part in the management of autoimmune disease. Just eliminating certain foods or food groups and replacing them with something different can make a world of difference in how a client feels. Before we dive into the recommendations and research, note that there isn't one specific cookie-cutter diet that will cure or help manage autoimmune diseases. It may take some time, patience and trial and error to find the diet that works best for a specific client. Here are some recommendations that generally work for most people. Start by helping clients make these swaps, see what works and continue to tweak the plan as needed. You have a big role to play here and in helping a client pinpoint what does and doesn't work. You need to work in partnership with your client because each client is going to have a different experience.

Swap out omega-6 fatty acids → Replace with omega-3 fatty acids

Typical American diets have excessive amounts of omega-6 fatty acids and are lacking in omega-3 fatty acids. As a refresher, our biggest source of omega-6's is vegetable oils, which we're getting too much of in packaged, processed foods, while omega-3's are found in foods like fatty fish, chia and flax. Research has linked a very high omega-6/omega-3 ratio to autoimmune diseases. In one study, a ratio of 2 or 3/1 suppressed inflammation in patients with RA, and a ratio of 5/1 was beneficial to patients with asthma. On the flip side, a ratio of 10/1 had negative consequences. It's worth pointing out that the average ratio in the American diet is 15 or 16/1. There have also been clinical trials showing the benefits of fish oils on autoimmune diseases including RA, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, psoriasis, lupus and MS, likely due to omega-3s ability to reduce inflammation and modulate immune activity. Help clients cut back on omega-6's by ditching packaged, processed foods (specific ideas below) and bump up the omega-3 content of the diets by including a few servings of fatty fish weekly.

Swap out egg whites → Replace with whole eggs

Vitamin D is linked to reduced risk of rheumatoid arthritis, and research shows low vitamin D status may play a role in the etiology of autoimmune diseases such as MS, type 1 diabetes, IBD and arthritis. Unfortunately, there aren't a ton of foods that are packed with vitamin D, but egg yolks are one of them. Instead of egg white omelettes encourage clients to use the whole egg. Other sources of vitamin D include halibut, salmon, mackerel, sardines and some mushrooms.

Swap out salt → Replace with herbs and spices

While sodium has been shown to exacerbate inflammation in autoimmune diseases, herbs and spices have the opposite effect. Research suggests foods such as curcumin-rich turmeric can reduce inflammation in IBD, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis and psoriasis sufferers. Scientists are looking at the role of cinnamon in treating MS with promising findings, and garlic has been shown to be beneficial in managing type 1 diabetes. Discuss cooking techniques that cut back on salt, and know that the biggest reduction in sodium will come from ditching packaged foods. At the same time, help clients find places in the diets to add more herbs and spices. At Nutritious Life, we recommend aiming for herbs or spices at every meal. Start at breakfast by sprinkling oregano on eggs.

Swap out coleslaw → Replace with kimchi

Okay, so coleslaw might not be an everyday food in someone's diet, but the point here is to find places to add in more fermented foods like kimchi, sauerkraut or pickled ginger. These foods play a role in diversifying and supporting the gut microbiome, and we know the microbiome has been linked to autoimmune diseases.

Swap out coffee → Replace with green tea

Green tea is a no brainer to add to a client's plan. It's full of epigallocatechin-3-gallate (EGCG) which plays a role in differentiating T cells and strengthening the immune system. There's lots of research in this area too. Several studies have found the compounds in green tea to be beneficial in managing MS and other autoimmune diseases.

Swap out iceberg lettuce → Replace with cruciferous vegetables

Cruciferous vegetables like Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale, broccoli and cauliflower are rich in glutathione, which slows inflammation and prevents oxidative stress. Glutathione status diminishes in people with autoimmune disease, and everyone actually as they age, so these foods can play a key role in alleviating symptoms.

Swap out processed, packaged foods → Replace with whole foods

Overall, work with the client to cut back on packaged, processed foods. Look through the food journal and find places you can ditch a packaged food and replace it with something fresh and wholesome. Some examples include:

- Full fat yogurt to replace a protein bar
- Nuts to replace chips or salty snacks
- Homemade soup to replace canned soup
- Air popped popcorn to replace the pretzels
- Dried fruit (without sugar or nitrates) to replace the candy jar
- A bowl of oatmeal to replace the muffin
- Pre-prepped homemade meal to replace frozen dinners

Other considerations to swap

There are a few food groups that may be connected to autoimmune diseases, though the research isn't firm and every client of course, will be different. If clients are really suffering, you may consider eliminating these foods and seeing how the client reacts.

Nightshades

Nightshades are vegetables in the Solanaceae family, which get their name because they contain an alkaloid called solanine. There's some evidence that solanine may increase inflammation and could worsen symptoms in people with autoimmune diseases, particularly rheumatoid arthritis. Animal research suggests these vegetables may increase inflammatory markers in people with arthritis. An older study found that 50% of people with arthritis who reportedly followed a "no nightshades" also reported 50% complete or substantial relief of symptoms. Vegetables in the nightshade family include potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and some spices including paprika, red pepper and curry, chili and cayenne powder. It may be worth a shot to remove these foods from a client's diet to see if autoimmune symptoms such as joint pain improve. If there is no improvement after a client has been at this diet for a few weeks, there's likely no need to keep these veggies off the plate.

Gluten

In Celiac disease, this one's a no-brainer. A gluten-free diet is absolutely the way to go because the body will attack gluten proteins, leading to small intestine damage. For other autoimmune diseases, the research isn't so solid, but removing gluten from the diet may potentially bring some relief. Clinical intervention studies suggest gluten-free diets may be helpful in managing symptoms of multiple sclerosis. On the contrary, most of the research exploring the connection between gluten free diets and psoriasis falls short in finding benefits. Unless a client has celiac disease, there's no clear evidence that eliminating gluten will be helpful, but it might be worth a shot. If symptoms don't improve, you can recommend they add it back in.

Animal Protein

Some evidence suggests going vegetarian may be helpful for autoimmune disease, but again the research is limited. In one very small study, 40% of participants following a vegan, gluten-free diet saw improvements in their symptoms of arthritis after one year on the diet. Other research suggests vegetarian diets may benefit gut microbiota and therefore might be helpful in managing autoimmune systems. The reality is the research is pretty weak here, but it might be worth exploring in clients who've seen no improvements with other interventions.

Autoimmune Protocol Diet

The autoimmune protocol (AIP) diet was developed by a group of researchers and authors as an extension of the Paleo diet. This diet eliminates gluten, refined sugar, grains, legumes, nightshades, dairy, eggs, coffee, alcohol, nuts and seeds, oils and food additives while emphasizing fresh, nutrient dense foods, bone broth, and fermented foods. It also takes into consideration other aspects of a healthy lifestyle such as sleep, stress management, relationships and exercise (ringing a bell to the pillars of a Nutritious Life?) After these foods are totally eliminated, some may be gradually reintroduced to identify what a person individually reacts to - basically, an elimination diet. One small study of 15 participants found the protocol beneficial in improving symptoms and inflammation in IBD. Much more research is needed in this area, but an elimination diet may be useful in pinpointing symptom triggering foods.

Bottom Line

In autoimmune disease management, it's all about nutrient density and freshness. Ditch packaged processed foods as much as possible to cut down on sodium and food additives that may be triggering inflammatory symptoms. Help clients choose foods with nutrients known to be beneficial to this population: omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, probiotics in fermented foods and lots of fruits and vegetables with anti-inflammatory polyphenols. Consider cutting other foods from the diet that may possibly be triggering symptoms, keeping an open mind that benefits might be negligent and outweighed by the risk of missing certain nutrients (think B vitamins in grains or omega-3s in fish). Remind your clients that they don't have to be perfect, they just need to keep trying to do a little better all the time. Small changes, especially in this population, matter a lot and can be really important!