Easy Ways to Improve Your Diet When You Have Lupus

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Lupus Diet and Lifestyle Tips

Lupus is an autoimmune disease affecting the body's immune system, causing this system to become hyperactive, attacking normal, healthy tissue. The symptoms can become tiring, which is why we talk about tips to achieve the best lifestyle with lupus.

Lupus, if left untreated, can cause damage to the kidneys, heart, lungs, blood, skin and joints. The symptoms of this chronic disorder usually start out as inflammation and swelling of the joints, and the patient will experience fatigue, rashes and irritability.

Diet and Lupus

If you have lupus, it is a good idea to eat a well-balanced diet, which consists of vegetables, fruits and whole grains in good amounts. Moderate amounts of meats, fish and poultry are also better for people with lupus.

Studies show that even if you eat these foods, they will not cure lupus, and there are no known foods to eliminate this chronic disease. However, a good healthy eating plan is vital to good health and for treating lupus.

How a Healthy Lupus Diet Helps

A healthy eating or diet plan will help lupus in these ways, and then some:

- Will help reduce the risk of heart disease
- Reduces inflammation
- Helps to keep a healthy weight
- Keeps bones and muscles strong
- Reduces medication side effects

Heart Disease, Lupus and Omega 3s

A healthy eating plan is essential for people with lupus because they have a higher risk for heart disease than people who do not suffer from this condition.

Your doctor may check for high blood pressure and high cholesterol. If either condition is found to occur along with lupus, they may recommend a diet plan that calls for low-fat foods and a low-salt diet, along with exercise.

Studies show that eating foods rich in omega 3 fatty acids will help reduce heart disease, which involves high blood pressure and high triglycerides. Omega 3 fatty acids can be obtained from fish or fish oils. A few foods high in omega 3 fatty acids include:

- Lake trout
- Rainbow trout
- Ground flaxseed
- Walnuts
- Canola oil
- Walnut oil
- Flaxseed oil
- Tuna
- Pecans
- Salmon
- Mackerel
- Bluefish
- Sardines
- Halibut
- Mullet
- Tuna
- Herring

Inflammation Reduction

Lupus symptoms could be reduced by eating the right foods. Even though studies have not proven this yet, many doctors feel that inflammation-fighting foods may be able to ward off lupus symptoms, since lupus is an inflammatory disease. The same applies to foods that cause inflammation, as they may worsen lupus.

Fruits and vegetables contain anti-inflammatory properties, and these foods contain antioxidants. Other foods that will fight inflammation are the omega 3 fatty acids such as nuts, canola oil, olive oil, fish, ground flaxseed and more.

Calcium and Vitamin D

Add foods high in calcium and vitamin D to your diet, especially if you are on corticosteroids (which can cause bone thinning) or if you experience lupus photosensitivity (which can limit your vitamin D).

Good calcium sources include:

- Dark leafy vegetables
- Dairy products
- Soybeans
- White beans
- Calcium-fortified foods or drinks

Vitamin D is found in:

- Fatty fish
- Cheese
- Egg yolks
- Vitamin D fortified foods

Low Fat and Low Sodium Foods

Choose low-fat options for the foods you eat regularly. Low-fat foods may prevent heart disease, and they are critical for people taking steroids, which typically cause cholesterol and blood sugar levels to increase.

If you have high blood pressure or kidney disease, known as lupus nephritis, eating a low-sodium diet will be beneficial. Check the sodium levels in your food and aim for less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium daily.

Next page: foods to avoid if you have lupus.

Foods to Avoid if You Have Lupus

Immune Stimulating Foods

People with lupus should avoid eating anything that can increase the activity of the immune system. Doing so can provoke an inflammatory response and lead to lupus flares. Some foods to avoid are:

- Alfalfa sprouts – they contain an amino acid that may stimulate the immune system.
- Large amounts of garlic – it may increase white blood cell activity, thus increasing immune system response.
- Immune stimulating supplements that contain Echinacea (sometimes found in cough drops) or the reishi mushroom.

Be wary of any food or supplement that claims to boost your immune system and check with your doctor if you are unsure about the possible effects of a certain food.

Inflammatory Foods

Since lupus and inflammation often go hand in hand, it can be helpful to avoid consuming large amounts of inflammatory foods. Highly inflammatory foods are sometimes easy to identify, such as fried and sugary foods. However, it can be difficult to determine whether or not some foods will ultimately lower inflammation.

You can take some of the guesswork out by checking inflammation ratings (called IF ratings) for many foods and ingredients at InflammationFactor.com. IF ratings look at more than 20 factors to determine the inflammatory status of foods. Anti-inflammatory foods have positive numbers while inflammatory foods have negative numbers.

It’s not necessary to limit yourself to foods with positive IF ratings. Instead, avoid the worst offenders and keep your daily total in the positive range.

Nightshade Vegetables (Possibly)

It may be worthwhile to pay close attention to how your body responds to nightshade vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplants, potatoes and peppers. They have not been proven to be harmful to people with lupus, but people do claim that nightshade vegetables worsen their lupus symptoms.

Putting a Healthy Eating Plan Into Motion

If your biggest obstacle is not eating healthy foods, but instead having the energy to shop for and cook them, try breaking up your tasks over a few days. Make a list on one day, do your shopping the next day and then cook a meal on the third day.

Lightening your daily load can help you avoid burnout – a time when you are more likely to reach for unhealthy convenience foods. I have found that my success rate for creating healthy meals is much higher when I do not try to do too much at one time.

Another helpful option to consider is a meal subscription box. Instead of draining your mental and physical energy with a shopping trip, you can have all the ingredients needed for a meal delivered to your doorstep. There are many popular services available, but HelloFresh stands out because there is a 30 minute preparation time per meal – very helpful for when you are feeling fatigued.

Avoid Craving Pitfalls

You may find that your cravings will naturally decrease as the nutritional value of your diet increases. If cravings still pop up, try substituting similar healthy foods in place of junk foods. Eat strawberries with whip cream if you are craving a sweet bowl of ice cream, or pretzels with peanut butter if you are craving salty chips.

Making incremental changes to your diet may help keep cravings down. Gradually swap out your go-to snacks for healthier options to make the transition easier.

Seek Help

Ask for solidarity from your family and friends; it may be easier to stay on track if they eat well alongside you. Talk to your doctor about making healthy changes and possibly meeting with a dietician.

It may help to remember that you are not alone; there are an estimated 5 million people worldwide with lupus who are trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Each person deserves the benefits that will come from eating a healthy diet with lupus.

Focus On Building Strong Bones and Muscles

Bone health is a big concern with lupus patients due to the medication used to treat lupus. The medication causes a higher risk for osteoporosis, among other side effects.

With osteoporosis, the bones will become weaker and break more easily, so it is important to keep an eye on bone and muscle health. Eating calcium-rich foods with vitamin D will help the bones to strengthen. Also, low-fat or fat-free food choices are just as good as the full-fat foods and drinks. Some bone strengthening foods and beverages are:

- Low-fat cheese
- Skim or 1% milk
- Low-fat yogurt with low sodium
- Lactose-free milk (for people who cannot drink regular milk)
- Almond milk (another alternative to regular milk)
- Fortified juice with vitamin D and calcium
- Soy milk
- Kale, spinach and most dark green vegetables
- Calcium supplements (prescribed by the doctor you can't get enough with food)