

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/10/health/secrets-pain-free-life/index.html>



Holistic ways to fight pain, and win

By Summer Suleiman, Special to CNN

Updated 7:18 AM ET, Fri January 10, 2014

Studies suggest meditation can reduce blood pressure, inflammation, pain response and stress hormone levels.

Story highlights

-
- Inflammation is the root cause of many illnesses, a doctor says
 - Physicians are slowly beginning to accept the importance of looking at pain holistically
 - Eating right, getting enough sleep and meditating can help manage pain

Crippled by searing pain, I lay sprawled in bed -- a scene that had become all too familiar to me.

For years, these dreaded episodes of fatigue, nausea and dizziness had come and gone. They would last for days at a time, haunting me like a ghost, then disappearing without a trace.

It started when I was 5. At 24, I was still battling the debilitating symptoms that wreaked havoc on my body.

And no one could tell me why.

Finally, two years ago, a doctor provided me with the answer I had been in search of for most of my life. He diagnosed me with a rare genetic disorder called [Familial Mediterranean Fever](#), a chronic inflammatory disease characterized by frequent attacks of fever, stomach and chest pain, and swollen joints.

The downside to learning the answer was the realization there was no cure.



Summer Suleiman

The doctor prescribed medication to manage my symptoms, but I still experienced a lot of pain and discomfort. So I began doing my own research on treating inflammation.

Inflammation is the root cause of many illnesses, according to Dr. Reza Ghorbani, medical director of the Advanced Pain Medicine Institute and author of "[Secrets to a Pain Free Life](#)." Cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's, arthritis and several digestive disorders have all been linked to chronic inflammation.

Inflammation is a natural part of your immune system; it occurs when the body is fighting against harm or infection. However, chronic inflammation hurts the body instead of healing it because the immune system is essentially attacking healthy cells, [according to the National Institutes of Health](#).

In his book, Ghorbani outlines several methods for treating inflammation.

"I've seen a trend among patients looking for alternative and natural treatment," Ghorbani says. "I think a lot of consumers, whether it's in pain treatment, the food they eat, or what they provide for their family, the trend is to look for something that is safer."

This year, for the first time ever at the annual American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain (ASRA) conference, experts held a half-day session dedicated to alternative treatments for chronic pain. Physicians are slowly beginning to recognize the importance of looking at pain holistically, says Dr. Asokumar Buvanendran, a board-certified pain management specialist and professor in the Department of Anesthesiology at Rush University Medical Center.

"There are a lot of remedies that are available outside of the traditional means of treating patients," Buvanendran says.

It's not all about herbs and acupuncture. An overall healthy lifestyle, including eating healthy foods and getting the proper amount of exercise, plays a big role in managing chronic pain, experts say.

I was intrigued by the stories I found about the potential healing properties of food and the mind. Skeptical, I started integrating the things I learned into my daily life.

Nearly two years after my diagnosis, my health has been transformed. Each person's experience is different, but these holistic remedies have helped me achieve a better quality of life.

First, find the right doctor

If you are living with pain, and feel that you haven't received the proper treatment, don't give up. Ask your family, friends, and colleagues for recommendations.

"I think patients need to understand that there are alternatives to what doctors normally prescribe for pain treatment," says Ghorbani. "Don't just take the doctor's word for it -- do your homework, too."

I spent most of my life looking before I found the right doctor. Keep searching until you find a doctor you feel comfortable with -- someone who can help you get the treatment you want.

Get adequate sleep

Getting the proper amount of sleep helps the body fight inflammation, pain and disease. A [2009 study](#) published in the medical journal *Sleep* found people who get less than six hours of sleep, or have disrupted sleep, have higher levels of C-reactive protein in the body, which causes inflammation.

As a journalist working rotating shifts, I was not getting proper sleep and my health suffered because of it. After I was diagnosed, I made adjustments to my lifestyle to allow for enough sleep. I feel healthier and stronger when I have slept sufficiently.

Meditate

Research has shown the many health benefits of meditation. Studies suggest meditation can reduce blood pressure, inflammation, pain response and stress hormone levels, all while increasing concentration and improving sleep. [One study](#) funded by the National Institute of Health showed mindful meditation can help with pain regulation through cognitive and emotional control.

I began meditating shortly after I was diagnosed in January 2012. It has been a significant part of my recovery and improved health. There are various websites, books, and guided meditations available online. It can be as simple as taking 10 minutes a day to sit in stillness.

Managing stress is a significant part of healthy living. When stress goes unmanaged, it causes inflammation in the body. In a [study done at Ohio State University](#), researchers showed that people who dwelled on stressful events in their lives, had higher levels of C-reactive protein. Meditation is a helpful tool to help manage stress, and it is available to everyone.

Eat foods that feed you

What you eat has a direct impact on how you feel. According to a study [published in Psychosomatic Medicine](#), women who eat a diet high in red and processed meats, sweets, desserts and refined grains (foods known to promote inflammation) have higher levels of C-reactive protein than those who ate a diet full of fruit, vegetables, legumes, fish, poultry and whole grains.

I've incorporated many natural anti-inflammatory foods into my diet, including ginger, turmeric and cinnamon. I eat fruits and vegetables that are powerful anti-inflammatories such as pomegranates, blueberries and blackberries.

I also do my best to eliminate foods that are inflammatory, such as sugar, one of the biggest culprits. I can feel the difference because of these changes. There is an abundant source of books available on the topic. "[The Encyclopedia of Healing Foods](#)" and "Secrets to a Pain Free Life" are a good place to start. You can take control of your pain, and your life, by eating right.

"No one should accept pain as a normal part of their life," Ghorbani says.

Don't neglect your brain

Both Buvanendran and Ghorbani believe another big part of treating chronic pain is addressing the psychological impact it has on patients.

"The physiology of pain is really connected to the emotional part of it," Ghorbani says. "It really can exaggerate when you get upset, anxious and depressed, and (in turn) increase your pain level."

Buvanendran says mental health professionals can help patients navigate the emotional terrain of managing chronic pain.

"Patients are sometimes reluctant to see a therapist, but once they see them, they find the benefits to be extraordinary."

Oftentimes loved ones may not fully comprehend the emotional toll that chronic pain can take on you. A therapist can offer the support and guidance that you may need to help you cope with chronic pain.

Your insurance company may provide coverage for a mental health specialist. Do your research and use all the resources available to you.

I found a therapist who specialized in patients with chronic illnesses. She helped me realize that I needed to accept my illness, something I hadn't been able to do, before I could really begin the healing process. I was struggling with the loss of my health, and she helped me to understand that it was OK to feel that way.

Once we were able to work through that, I was able to find gratitude in my new life, and begin to move forward.