

Endometriosis: Article Two

In the first article I wrote on the subject of endometriosis, giving an understanding of what the condition is and some thoughts on how it comes about. The two outstanding features of endometriosis are the inflammation and the underlying hormone imbalances, which combine to create its particular set of symptoms. For women who wish to reduce the severity of their symptoms and/or the likelihood of a recurrence after surgery it is vital that these be addressed.

When it comes to controlling inflammation there is no doubt about it; diet is important. The types of foods we eat can have a significant impact on the kinds of chemicals our bodies produce and how well we control inflammation. This is because the types of fat in the food will determine what kinds of hormone-like substances (prostaglandins) we make, and whether these will be inflammatory or anti-inflammatory. To reduce the production of inflammatory prostaglandins, our diet must contain the correct ratio of omega-3 essential fatty acids (EFAs) to omega-6 EFAs. Omega-3 and omega-6 compete for the use of the same enzymes to convert them into prostaglandins. If there are plenty of omega-3s the enzyme pathways will favour the production of anti-inflammatory prostaglandins, but if there are not enough omega-3s, the pathways will produce inflammatory prostaglandins which cause pain.

The standard Western diet has evolved to be high in omega-6 and low in omega-3 fatty acids. As a result, it could be referred to as an “inflammatory diet”. This is because we eat more dairy, meat, poultry, eggs, saturated fat and fried foods than we do fish, nuts and seeds. While omega-6s are not necessarily bad, a skewed ratio in favor of too much omega-6 can be detrimental to one’s health and can significantly increase the pain associated with inflammatory conditions. The amount of saturated fat in the diet can also significantly affect the types of prostaglandins produced. Too much saturated fat will result in a blocking of the pathway which produces the anti-inflammatory prostaglandins, leading to more pain.

I usually advise anyone with an inflammatory condition such as endometriosis or arthritis to eat an “anti-inflammatory diet”. This means eating oily fish such as salmon, sardines, herring, eel or mackerel at least 5 times per week for lunch or dinner. (White fish like tuna, terakihi, cod or groper does not contain the same level of omega 3). Studies have shown that the fish listed above are the most bio-available sources of omega-3 and that they are more effective than supplements when eaten often enough. This is because the omega-3s in fish come in the form of a triglyceride, rather than as the ethyl-ester form found in most supplements. Another option is to use flaxseed oil to make salad dressings and to use 1-2 tbsp of dressing on vegetables or salad daily, or to use 2 tbsp of ground flaxseeds over breakfast or in sandwiches if you don’t use the dressing.

Eating an anti-inflammatory diet also includes minimizing red meat, dairy products and things containing dairy; avoiding alcohol other than the very occasional glass of red wine; ensuring that you eat 2-3 different pieces of fruit every day; ensuring that you eat 2-3 cups of mixed non-root vegetables every day over the course of lunch and dinner, (vegetable sticks as a snack are another great way of increasing the vegetable side of things); drinking at least 1 ½ litres of water every day; avoiding foods and drinks made with sugar; avoiding fried foods and junk food; avoiding things made with white flour; eating regularly and not over-eating at meal times. It fascinates me how many people

under-estimate the impact that their diet has on the state of their body, and how many people treat their diet as a negotiable factor in their well being. 95% of our daily food intake should be for the health of our bodies, with just the occasional treat for the soul.

When it comes to supplements, I am often asked which is better; flaxseed or fish oil? The oil from fish will always be converted more easily by the body than the oil from flaxseed. This is because it uses one enzyme complex less to break it down than the flaxseed. This also makes fish oil more conservative in the use of magnesium, zinc and B₆, which is helpful because many women with hormonal problems are deficient in these three nutrients.

Stimulating blood flow to the pelvic area often helps with the level of pain. A tea made with 1 tsp of honey, 1 tsp cinnamon, 1-2 tsp grated ginger root and the juice of one lemon brewed for 15 minutes in a covered vessel assists with this. It needs to be stirred while drinking to stop the cinnamon from sinking to the bottom of the cup and 2-3 cups per day is the recommended dose. It must be used everyday and takes a while to take effect so perseverance is the key!

Endometriosis is what is termed as an “estrogen-dominant” condition. This means that estrogen is a lot more active and is present in larger quantities relative to progesterone during the monthly cycle. This imbalance will be greatly increased where there is inflammation because the action of the inflammatory chemicals changes the way the liver breaks down estrogen. This leads to a build up of estrogen in general and also changes the type of estrogen produced, resulting in a dominance of the strongest form of it. This is where controlling inflammation and improving the breakdown of estrogen via the liver is essential, and is where the right herbs (I often use tinctures of Schisandra and Rosemary) and nutrients can be very effective.

There is much that can be done to bring the hormonal side of things into line. Good regular bowel function is a must to prevent the re-absorption of hormones from the stools back into the bloodstream. Resolving constipation is often one of the first things we do for this reason. For a lot of women with constipation, it is simply a matter of increasing their water intake and fibre intake. Psyllium hulls usually work very well as an inexpensive fibre source, as does porridge.

It is best to consult a professional in regards to correcting hormonal imbalances because the herbs required and their dosage may vary from person to person. At the clinic we usually make a herbal formula using a combination of anti-inflammatory, liver and hormonal herbs which is specific to each woman’s needs. The herbs most commonly required are those which improve the ovarian function and the ability of the corpus luteum to produce progesterone. This is where Chaste tree can be especially good but again, it pays to get the right dosage.

It is important to look at other factors which may be part of the problem, such as whether the thyroid gland and adrenals are working properly and that their hormones are being used effectively. It is not uncommon for a woman with endometriosis to have many of the symptoms which would indicate a sluggish response to thyroid hormone, or a difficulty in converting T₄ to T₃. It is possible to get an interference with the conversion of T₄ to T₃ where the inflammation has gone on for a long time, because eventually the levels of cortisol will start to affect this process. We have a very effective treatment for women where the thyroid and adrenal function is part of the problem. Addressing other sources of inflammation which increase the demand for cortisol such as allergy problems,

food intolerances, asthma, eczema and bowel complaints is also an important part of the process, and again, these are all things we can help with.

If you require further help with anything in this article, please contact us at The Self Heal Clinic on 06-304 8177. The dispensary is open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.