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INTERSTITIAL CYSTITIS AND DIET

Introduction

Many interstitial cystitis (IC) patients find that diet modification helps to control symptoms and avoid flare-ups. Others note that what they eat or drink seems to have little effect on how they feel. Anecdotal evidence collected by doctors and the Interstitial Cystitis Association (ICA) reveals that determining which foods may act as triggers is an individual matter.

Although there are broad guidelines that most IC patients can follow, discovering which particular foods may cause you problems requires perseverance. Many IC patients report that restricting their diet is an effective form of treatment and believe that it is worth the effort.

If you would like to explore the role diet may play in your symptoms, it is best to begin with an elimination diet that includes only those foods listed in the "okay to try" sections below, which most IC patients report they can tolerate. Try eating several small meals instead of one large one. Keeping a food diary where you record everything you eat is a useful technique for monitoring diet. After a few weeks, start introducing the foods listed in the "avoid" sections of the next two columns, one at a time. If after eating a given food you have no flare-up in symptoms, you should be able to continue consuming this item without problems. If any symptoms do occur, eliminate the given food from your diet.

After you have completed the work of determining which foods to eliminate from your diet, you may find that you can tolerate some troublesome items on a rotation basis. Try introducing these foods in small amounts once every five to seven days. If symptoms do not flare excessively, this can be a good alternative to giving up favorite foods entirely.

Discovering which foods you should restrict can be a lengthy process that requires discipline. You may also want to consider working with a nutritionist and/or a specialist in food and environmental allergies.

Diet Suggestions: Do's and Don'ts

The idea behind managing your diet is to avoid foods that may irritate your bladder. Here is a list of some of the suggested items to restrict, followed by foods that a number of IC patients have noted do not cause them problems.

Milk/Dairy Products

Avoid: aged cheeses, sour cream, yogurt and chocolate

Okay to try: white chocolate, non-aged cheeses such as cottage or American, frozen yogurt and milk

Vegetables

Avoid: fava beans, lima beans, onions, tofu, soy beans and tomatoes

Okay to try: other vegetables and home grown tomatoes (which may be less acidic)

Fruits

Avoid: apples, apricots, avocados, bananas, cantaloupes, citrus fruits, cranberries, grapes, nectarines, peaches, pineapples, plums, pomegranates, rhubarb, strawberries and juices made from these fruits

Okay to try: melons (other than cantaloupes) and pears

Carbohydrates and Grains

Avoid: rye and sourdough bread

Okay to try: other breads, pasta, potatoes and rice

Meats and Fish

Avoid: aged, canned, cured, processed or smoked meats and fish, anchovies, caviar, chicken livers, corned beef, and meats which contain nitrates or nitrites

Okay to try: other poultry, fish and meat

Nuts

Avoid: most nuts

Okay to try: almonds, cashews and pine nuts

Beverages

Avoid: alcoholic beverages, beer, carbonated drinks such as sodas, coffee, tea, cranberry juice and wine

Okay to try: bottled or spring water, decaffeinated, acid-free coffee and tea, and some herbal teas.
Call
1-800.TEALEAF for information on coffees and teas.

Seasonings

Avoid: mayonnaise, miso, spicy foods (especially such ethnic foods as Chinese, Indian, Mexican and Thai), soy sauce, salad dressing and vinegar

Okay to try: garlic and other seasonings

Preservatives and Additives

Avoid: benzol alcohol, citric acid, monosodium glutamate (MSG), aspartame (Nutrasweet®), saccharine, foods containing preservatives and artificial ingredients and colors

Miscellaneous

Avoid: tobacco, caffeine, diet pills, junk foods, recreational drugs, cold and allergy medications containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, and certain vitamins

Although the list of foods to avoid may initially appear daunting, remember that there are still many foods you can enjoy. Some IC patients report that they have the least trouble with rice, potatoes, pasta, vegetables, meat, and chicken. With these foods as a base for your diet, you can create nutritious and flavorful meals. You can still cook for family and friends and share meals with them because the foods you can eat are the basic elements of a healthful, balanced diet. However, you may need to make some minor adjustments, such as setting your serving aside before adding seasonings. You may also want to consider adding a source of fiber to your diet to promote regular bowel movements.

Suggestions

With some imaginative effort, you should be able to come up with substitutions for your favorite foods and drinks which will not aggravate your symptoms. Here are a few suggestions:

Add a pinch of salt to carbonated beverages to make them flat.

Try reduced-acid orange juice now available in supermarkets.

Try Prelief® a natural dietary supplement which helps neutralize acidic foods. Prelief is available over-the-counter at pharmacies and grocery stores in granulate or tablets. For more information call 1-800-994-4711.

Boil down all sauces containing alcohol.

Dining Out

Once you have determined which foods cause you trouble, you should be able to eat in restaurants or at social gatherings without too much difficulty. You will simply need to ask about ingredients or stay away from dishes where ingredients are hard to discern. Spicy ethnic foods can pose a problem when dining out because the spices used may cause the release of trouble-making histamines. The ingredients in these dishes are often difficult to determine as well. Before ordering, ask your waiter what spices are used in particular dishes.

Food Allergies

Doctors find that some IC patients have additional symptoms that are caused by food allergies. Allergies to wheat, corn, rye, oats and barley are common. Other patients with milk allergies and lactose intolerance may experience a severe response to these foods. Although the existence of systemic yeast or "yeast syndrome" remains controversial in the medical community, a number of IC patients report success with a yeast-free diet which eliminates yeast, cheeses, molds, alcohol and fermented foods. If you suspect that food allergies play a role in your IC symptoms, you should consult a doctor or nutritionist who specializes in food and environmental allergies.

What if I have eaten something I shouldn't have?

If you have eaten a forbidden food or tried a new dish only to discover afterwards that it has brought on symptoms, take one teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of water. This helps to alkalize the urine and prevent the acids in urine from irritating the bladder. Some patients take baking soda as a preventative before consuming problematic foods. Those who have heart conditions, high blood pressure, or other medical conditions affected by salt intake should consult their doctors before taking baking soda because of its high salt content. If you have a flare in symptoms after eating, you should also drink plenty of water to Dilute the urine.

Conclusions

Making the changes necessary in the diet to help control IC is a challenge, as are so many aspects of this disease. Don't get discouraged if you do not discover your ideal diet even after a few weeks of trial and error. The process takes time and patience, but if you are like many others with IC, it may pay off in a reduction in your symptoms.

Resources and References

Overcoming Bladder Disorders by Rebecca Chalker and Kristene E. Whitmore, M.D.

A Taste of the Good Life: A Cookbook for an Interstitial Cystitis Diet by Beverly Laumann

Amy's Kitchen, an IC & diet column featured in the ICA's quarterly newsletter, the ICA Update

This information is for educational purposes only and is adapted from the Interstitial Cystitis Association webpage available at:

<http://www.ichelp.org>