

Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations for Autoimmune Disease

While autoimmune disease may not be completely curable, removing the triggers can often lead to a significant reduction in symptoms or even complete remission. Following an autoimmune protocol (AIP) diet may lower inflammation and support autoimmune disease symptoms.

The following guidelines aim to remove common triggers from diet and lifestyle.

1. FOLLOW A BASIC PALEO DIET WITH THE FOLLOWING ADDITIONAL FOODS REMOVED COMPLETELY FOR 30 DAYS

- **Eggs (both yolks and whites):** Eggs contain proteins that are common allergens, particularly in susceptible people.
- **Nightshade fruits and vegetables:** Nightshades have compounds called alkaloids that can cause inflammation and worsen joint pain in susceptible people. They include white potatoes, tomatoes, sweet and hot peppers, eggplant, tomatillos, pepinos, pimentos, paprika, and cayenne pepper (but not black pepper).
- **Nuts and seeds:** The phytic acid content and proteins in nuts and seeds may provoke intolerance, and autoimmune symptoms cascade in certain people.
- **Alcohol:** It may act as an aggravator of symptoms in people with autoimmune disease, since many of them also have correlated gut issues. Alcohol can be abrasive to the gut, especially when dysbiosis is already present. Sulfites and histamine issues derived from alcohol may also contribute to autoimmune symptoms.
- **Coffee:** Some people with autoimmune disease become more susceptible to histamine reactions from commercial coffee, which can trigger symptoms. In some instances, switching to organic quality, freshly roasted coffee may eliminate the intolerance. When eliminated foods are reintroduced after 30 days, we recommend trying a really good quality coffee.
- **Dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese, and butter):** The sugar (lactose) or the proteins in milk (alpha- and beta-casein) can cause autoimmune reactions. In addition, many people who have gluten intolerance will not tolerate dairy either. Note: A Paleo diet eliminates gluten. One exception to be aware of for some people regarding dairy is ghee where the milk solids have been removed, so some people find they tolerate ghee just fine, but do not tolerate other dairy products. This category eliminates dairy from cows, goats, and sheep for the first 30 days.

These are all healthy foods when well tolerated, but they may provoke or perpetuate inflammation in those with autoimmune disease. That said, not everyone with autoimmune

disease will have trouble with them, so the key is to experiment to determine where you fall on that spectrum. An elimination diet is considered the gold standard for identifying food sensitivities/intolerances.

2. INCREASE YOUR INTAKE OF NUTRIENTS TO PROMOTE OPTIMAL IMMUNE FUNCTION

- **Glutathione** — This is the most important antioxidant in the human body and it supports detoxification. To support the production and recycling of glutathione, increase your intake of:
 - **Protein** — Aim for a minimum of 15 percent of calories as protein (75 grams on a 2,000-calorie diet or 95 grams on a 2,500-calorie diet); 20 to 25 percent may produce better results.
 - **Collagen-rich animal parts (skin, cartilage, and bone)** — These foods contain glycine, which is needed for glutathione synthesis and recycling.
 - **Polyphenol-rich fruits and vegetables** — Examples include berries, peaches, pears, pomegranates, purple sweet potatoes, broccoli, garlic, cabbage, and spinach.
 - **Selenium-rich foods** — Examples include Brazil nuts, ocean fish, and poultry.
- **EPA and DHA**
 - Consume at least one pound of cold-water, fatty fish per week, such as the SMASH fish list (salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and herring).
- **Vitamin D**
 - The best food sources of vitamin D are cod liver oil, cold-water fatty fish, and pastured duck and chicken eggs. Make sure you're regularly eating these foods!
 - Aim to spend 20 minutes with about 40 percent of your skin exposed to sunlight between 8:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. at least several times per week when possible.
- **Other Nutrients** — Several other nutrients directly or indirectly contribute to glutathione synthesis and immune health, including niacin (vitamin B3), riboflavin (vitamin B2), pyridoxine (vitamin B6), vitamin C, magnesium, iron, copper, zinc, and manganese. The best way to optimize your intake of these nutrients is to focus on foods with the highest nutrient density such as:
 - Organ meats
 - Herbs and spices (provided you tolerate them). Note that paprika and cayenne pepper are nightshade spices.
 - Nuts and seeds (provided you tolerate them and they are optimally soaked, sprouted, and dehydrated first to maximize nutrient absorption)

- Cacao (provided you tolerate it)
 - Fish and seafood
 - Fresh vegetables
 - Red meat, pork, and poultry
 - Eggs and dairy (provided you tolerate them)
 - Seaweed
- **Fermented Foods** — Fermented foods contain beneficial bacteria and yeasts. These probiotics don't just support gastrointestinal health—they also regulate and balance the immune system. Aim for at least a small amount of fermented foods with each meal such as 1 to 2 tablespoons of sauerkraut or kimchi or 1 teaspoon of the liquid.
 - **Fermentable Fibers** — Soluble fibers naturally found in fruits, vegetables, starches, and nuts and seeds provide a food source for the beneficial bacteria in the gut. Starches like cooked and cooled potatoes, sweet potatoes, plantains, taro root, bananas with some green on the peel, and yucca are particularly good sources of soluble fibers.

Note: some people with gastrointestinal issues may benefit from reducing intake of fiber for a time.

3. MAKE LIFESTYLE CHANGES THAT CAN AID YOUR RECOVERY

- **Exercise** — Regular aerobic exercise and strength training have been shown to increase glutathione levels in both healthy and sick people. Exercise also releases chemicals called endorphins. Endorphins are similar in chemical structure to morphine and opium, and they're responsible for the "runner's high" that some people experience with intense exercise. However, we now know that endorphins also play an important role in regulating the immune system. Endorphin levels are low in animals with autoimmune disease, and medications that increase circulating endorphin levels improve autoimmune disease in humans. Caution: over-exercising can make autoimmune symptoms worse, so the right amount of exercise for the individual is important.
- **Acupuncture** — There are two primary types of immunity: cellular and humoral. Cellular immunity is our first line of defense against pathogens like viruses and bacteria. It includes immune cells that directly attack and destroy these pathogens, regardless of whether or not the body has seen them before. Humoral immunity is our second line of defense. It involves immune cells that produce antibodies, which bind to specific pathogens that the body has been exposed to in the past. In autoimmune disease, there is often an imbalance between the cellular and humoral branches of the immune system, and acupuncture has been shown to restore that balance. Acupuncture may also support lowering inflammation.

- **Pleasure and connection** — Like exercise, pleasure and physical contact also produce endorphins, which have a regulatory effect on the immune system. But there's another less scientific reason to cultivate pleasure and connection when you're suffering from autoimmune disease: they provide an important counterweight against the pain and social isolation that people with chronic disease often experience.
- **Sun exposure** — Exposure to sunlight (or UVA/UVB light in tanning beds) appears to be especially important for those with autoimmune disease. The more hours of sun there are where you were born, the lower the risk that you'll develop multiple sclerosis—one example of an autoimmune disease. Evidence for benefit from sunlight is strong for other autoimmune diseases, as well, such as type 1 diabetes. Spend time outside in the sunlight as much as you can.
- **Enjoy your meals with loved ones** — Do your best to avoid eating alone. Eat with others, laugh, and enjoy your food as much as possible. This makes digestion and absorption much more successful.
- **Limbic system rehabilitation** — Clients who have used AIP dietary restrictions for a longer period of time may have developed a fearful or threatening relationship with food in general. They may also have become overly focused on what they can and cannot eat. This can trigger a fight-or-flight response in the body that does not turn off easily. Even after clients develop more tolerance to foods, they may still experience setbacks and may need intervention to regain parasympathetic (or rest and digest) function. Dynamic Neural Retraining System (DNRS) is one of a few methods to rehabilitate the brain's limbic system that Chris Kresser has recommended. You can find more information about DNRS in one of Chris' podcasts [here](#).

4. REINTRODUCING FOODS

Remember, reintroducing foods is optimal so that you can have more variety in your diet. Some people may need to stay away from certain foods for a longer period. In this case, a health practitioner can help to establish the need for supplementation, or to figure out alternative foods to replace important nutrients. When you choose to reintroduce foods, make sure to follow these reintroduction principles:

- Reintroduce only one food every three days.
- Keep a food diary to track your symptoms.
- “Low and slow” wins the game (don't rush!).
- Context matters. (You might find that you're able to tolerate certain foods well at some times, but not others. Monitor how your stress levels may play a role in this.)

As a suggested guide, start reintroduction with egg yolks, then proceed to egg whites, and continue with the nightshades, then the nuts and seeds, then dairy and alcohol.

Any other foods that have been eliminated (with a standard Paleo Reset Diet) can then be reintroduced, such as rice, coffee, chocolate, or buckwheat. Realize this is an individual process. Seek the guidance of a nutrition expert if you need individual guidance. This guide is meant to be a general reference and does not cover every possible food item.

RECOMMENDED ORDER OF FOOD REINTRODUCTION:

EGGS	
Egg yolks	Yolks contain most of the nutrients and are better tolerated; raw or cooked.
Egg whites	Whites must always be cooked; one of the more common allergens.

NIGHTSHADES	
Tomatoes/tomatillos (raw)	Raw tomatoes are often better tolerated than cooked tomatoes.
Tomatoes/tomatillos (cooked)	See above.
Potatoes	Avoid the skin on white potatoes.
Eggplant	Eggplant is often not well tolerated by people with arthritis/joint/digestive problems.
Chili pepper/paprika/cayenne	Make sure to check labels.

NUTS AND SEEDS	
Almonds	Soaked and sprouted are tolerated best by many; may be problematic in those sensitive to foods high in oxalates.
Walnuts	Soaked and sprouted is the best trial option if possible.
Pumpkin seeds	Soaking and sprouting is recommended; in this form, it's an excellent source of zinc and other nutrients. Look for the Go Raw brand or make your own.
Sunflower seeds	Prepared as mentioned above is the best first option if possible, but not required.
Flax seeds	Best fresh ground and stored in the refrigerator, as this seed can easily oxidize when stored at room temperature.

Note: The Nuts and Seeds category is extensive. The list above represents only a partial list. The table is just an example to help you get started. For reintroduction, begin with a trial of 1 to 2 tablespoons of the nut or seed category or 1 tablespoon of nut or seed butter or flour. Some people who do not tolerate the full form or butter might find they can tolerate the oil. We recommend you trial very clean nut or seed butters without additional added ingredients.



DAIRY PRODUCTS cont.	
Ghee	No detectable casein or lactose; almost everyone can tolerate it (ghee is permitted during a Paleo Reset Diet, but if you have removed it, you can try adding it back here).
Butter	Very little casein and <1 percent lactose; usually well tolerated.
Kefir*	Homemade 24-hour kefir <1 percent lactose; store-bought 1 to 3.5 percent lactose.
Homemade yogurt*	Homemade 24-hour yogurt <1 percent lactose; usually well tolerated.
Store-bought yogurt*	4.1-4.7 percent lactose (because in general, it is less fermented).
Hard cheese*	0 to 3.5 percent lactose depending on variety; significant amounts of casein.
Soft cheese	0 to 5 percent lactose depending on variety; significant amounts of casein.
Cream	A.k.a. “full-fat cream,” “whipping cream,” or “heavy cream”; 3 percent lactose.
Sour cream	3 to 4.3 percent lactose; try to find a “live, cultured” sour cream or make it at home.
Buttermilk	3.6 to 5.0 percent lactose; try to find “live, cultured” variety.
Ice cream	3.1 to 8.4 percent lactose; homemade is best so you control sugar content.
Raw milk	3.7 to 5.1 percent lactose; contains beneficial bacteria that aid in digestion.
Half & half	Half cream and half pasteurized milk; not well tolerated by most people.
Pasteurized milk	3.7 to 5.1 percent lactose; do not recommend pasteurized milk for most people.

* The fermentation process might also break down proteins into smaller, more easily digested peptides and amino acids.

ALCOHOL	
Wine	Not well tolerated by people with sensitivity to yeast.
Tequila	Made from the blue agave plant; usually well tolerated.
Vodka	Potato vodka preferred (Zodiac, Cirrus, Schramm, Chopin, Karlsson’s).
Sake	Made from rice.

AIP Red Flags

When used for too long, AIP can have serious risks that can make overall health or an autoimmune condition worse, such as:

- Malnutrition
- Accidental low-carb intake
- Orthorexia
- Social isolation
- Calcium deficiency due to long-term lack of dairy without replacement of calcium, which can be reflected as:
 - Increased dental cavities
 - Osteopenia or osteoporosis

Seek the help of a Functional Health practitioner and refer to the lifestyle modifications list above for possible interventions to implement to address red flags.

ADDITIONAL AIP RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY CHRIS KRESSER

- [The Paleo Mom](#)
- [Autoimmune Wellness](#)
- [Phoenix Helix](#)