

The Beginner's Guide To The Autoimmune Protocol

January 25, 2015 By Megan McGrane

This is a guest post by Megan McGrane – physician's assistant, health coach and autoimmune warrior.



Did you know that autoimmunity is one of the top ten causes of fatality in females under sixty-five years old? According to the National Institutes of Health, autoimmune disorders affect over twenty-three million people in the United States each year.

Autoimmune disorders include hundreds of medical conditions that are due to the body's own immune system attacking its own organs. For example, thyroiditis is an attack on the thyroid gland, Crohn's disease attacks the gastrointestinal system, multiple sclerosis attacks the nervous system, and lupus primarily attacks the kidneys.

One of the most frustrating things autoimmune conditions is that there is no curative treatment for them. Current therapies are often aimed at managing the symptoms alone.

By **using food as medicine**, autoimmune protocol (AIP) followers are able to reduce troublesome symptoms and heal underlying imbalances by decreasing inflammation and healing **gut dysfunction**. The diet focuses on a nutrient-dense intake and eliminates inflammatory and allergenic foods to support the body in cooling down the immune system (which is what's going awry).

The take home point about AIP is that if you have an autoimmune issue, you most likely have a poorly functioning digestive tract. Because **your gut** is not in the best shape, byproducts of all of the things passing through your intestines are leaking through your gut barrier into your blood stream, causing your immune system to respond. This concept is fundamental to understanding why the AIP works in decreasing inflammation and immune system stimulation.

How To Follow The Autoimmune Protocol

There are very specific rules to follow to use AIP. At first, the list of foods that aren't permitted foods can feel overwhelming, but let's break it down.

Start with basic paleo principles

No **gluten**, no **grains**, no **legumes**, no **dairy**, no **sugar**, and no **alcohol**. You've got that down already. **Gluten** is inflammatory for the gut and should be removed from the diet of anyone with autoimmune disorders. **Grains** and **legumes** are removed to avoid anti-nutrients like phytic acid and inflammatory lectins. **Sugar** and **alcohol** are removed because they are highly inflammatory and do not bring any nutritional value or healing properties to the table.

Avoid nightshade vegetables

Vegetables such as peppers, eggplant, and tomatoes have been found to be particularly inflammatory, causing joint pain, skin irritation, and **gut discomfort**.

Avoid eggs

Eggs are eliminated because the proteins and enzymes in eggs (and in the white in particular) are able to work their way through the gut lining during the digestion process. Although this can occur in healthy people as well, in those with autoimmune conditions, the egg particulate matter gets through the barrier of the gut lining easily and infiltrates the blood stream, causing immune system stimulation and reactivity.

Avoid all nuts and seeds

Nuts and seeds are high in anti-nutrients such as lectins and phytates. They are one of the most allergenic types of foods and can cause sensitivities in people struggling with autoimmunity. Additionally, the ratio of omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acids is suboptimal in most nuts and seeds. In fact, nuts contain a high amount of omega-6 fatty acids, which are pro-inflammatory.

Keep fruit to a minimum

Try to keep **fruit** to one to two servings per day. This keeps blood sugar levels stable and also helps you avoid taking in too much fructose, which can be irritating for the gut.

Avoid food additives like guar gum and carrageenan

These additives bring no health benefits and contribute to **leaky gut**. Other additive like nitrites are inflammatory for the body and can also be allergenic.

Avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications

Avoiding NSAIDs is about attempting to heal the gut lining, as this is critical in managing autoimmune disorders. This can be tricky because many medical regimens for autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, chronic pain syndromes, and acute bouts of thyroiditis use NSAIDs. Before removing these medications from your regimen, discuss this with your medical provider.

Quick Start For AIP

So what CAN you eat? Well, you're in luck. We've put together an awesome little graph that shows you the ins & outs of this paleo variation so you can stay on track and stay healthy!

FOOD GROUP	AVOID	EAT
MEATS	Factory farmed meats, farm raised seafood	Beef, Bison, Chicken, Turkey, Boar, Wild Caught Fish, Game Meats
GRAINS	Oats, Rice, Millet, Quinoa (a pseudo grain), Wheat, all Gluten	None
LEGUMES	All Beans (not including string beans or snap peas), Soy/Edamame and Peanuts	Snap Peas, String Beans, Haricot Vert
VEGETABLES	Avoid Nightshades, Eggplant, Tomatoes, Onion, White Potatoes, Gogi Berries, and all pepper based spices like cayenne, nutmeg, paprika	Everything else! Asparagus, Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, Leafy Greens, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Cucumber, Beets, Squash, Carrots, Sweet Potatoes and many more

FOOD GROUP	AVOID	EAT
FRUIT	None	All fruits are permitted. *To keep daily fructose intake reasonable try to stick to a max of 2-3 pieces of fruit per day
DAIRY	Cheese, Yogurt, Ghee, Butter, Ice Cream, Half and Half	Coconut milk (without additives)
EGGS	All kinds	None
NUTS AND SEEDS	Almonds, Cacao, Coffee Cashews, Macadamias, Sunflower Seeds, Pumpkin Seeds, Chia Seeds, Sesame Seeds	None
FERMENTED FOODS	Fermented Soy products	Kombucha, Sauerkraut, Kimchi, Kefir made with water/coconut water
SUGAR AND SUGAR REPLACEMENT	All sugars! Sugar, HCFs, coconut sugar, date sugar, corn sugar, stevia, agave, molasses and limit honey and maple syrup	None
FATS	All Butter & ghee, all Margarines, Canola Oil & all other seed oils	Avocado, Avocado Oil, Coconut Oil, Lard, Fat, Olive Oil

FOOD GROUP	AVOID	EAT
FOOD ADDITIVES	Carrageenan, Guar Gum, Aspartame, Benzoic acid, MSG, Sulfates/Sulfites, Nitrates/Nitrites	None
NSAIDS	Ibuprofen, Naprosyn, Naproxen sodium, ketorolac and others	None
ALCOHOL	Beer, Liquor, even sugar alcohols and extracts (like vanilla extract)	None (Sparkling water and Kombucha are great party-substitutes!)

Here's table in graphic form (you can save it and download it for quick reference).

PALEO AIP QUICK START

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MEATS	Factory farmed meats, farm raised seafood	Beef, Bison, Chicken, Turkey, Boar, Wild Caught Fish, Game Meats
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VEGETABLES	Avoid Nightshades, Eggplant, Tomatoes, Onion, Peppers, White Potatoes, Gogi Berries, and all pepper based spices like cayenne, nutmeg, paprika	Everything else! Asparagus, Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, Leafy Greens, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Cucumber, Beets, Squash, Carrots, Sweet Potatoes and many more
FRUIT	None	All fruits are permitted. *To keep daily fructose intake reasonable try to stick to a max of 2-3 pieces of fruit per day
DIARY	Cheese, Yogurt, ghee, Butter, Ice Cream, Half and Half	Coconut milk (without additives)
EGGS	All kinds	None
NUTS AND SEEDS	Almonds, Cacao, Coffee Cashews, Macadamias, Sunflower Seeds, Pumpkin Seeds, Chia Seeds, Sesame Seeds	None
FERMENTED FOODS	Fermented Soy products	Kombucha, Sauerkraut, Kimchi, Kefir made with water/coconut water
SUGAR AND SUGAR REPLACEMENT	All sugars! Sugar, HFCs, coconut sugar, date sugar, corn sugar, stevia, agave, molasses and limit honey and maple syrup	None
FATS	All Butter & ghee, all Margarines, Canola Oil & all other seed oils	Avocado, Avocado Oil, Coconut Oil, Lard, Duck Fat, Olive Oil
FOOD ADDITIVES	Carrageenan, Guar Gum, Aspartame, Benzoic Acid, MSG, Sulfates/Sulfites, Nitrates/Nitrites	None
NSAIDS	Ibuprofen, Naprosyn, Naproxen sodium, ketorolac and others	None
ALCOHOL	Beer, Liquor, even sugar alcohols and extracts (like vanilla extract)	None (Sparkling water and Kombucha are great party-substitutes!)



Ultimate Paleo Guide

The Ultimate Guide To The Paleo Diet

Where To Start

One key to AIP success is to focus on following the diet for a set period of time and to track your symptoms over a number of weeks. How long you choose to stay on the AIP is 100% up to you and should depend on how you feel following the diet. A strict elimination period of at least thirty to sixty days is recommended, but many people stay on the protocol for months until they start seeing the resolution of their autoimmune symptoms.

By setting a timeline for your elimination diet, you can focus on the healing aspect of the diet and stay motivated with an endpoint in sight. One final thing to note is that, while AIP may help you to find out which foods you react to, the strict autoimmune protocol is not necessarily meant to be followed for life. Once you've completed the diet, have a focused reintroduction period to identify your food triggers and sensitivities.

Photo credit: Caitlin Regan

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