One man’s food is another man’s poison. Could your food actually be making you sick?  In a recent conversation with Harvey J. White, MD, Founder and Executive Director of Vessel Health, and Deanna Fisher, an authority in holistic and integrative nutrition, we discussed food sensitivity and how diet affects our overall cardiovascular health.

Paula Bates (PB): Why should individuals be concerned about food sensitivities?

Dr. Harvey White: Although certain foods can cause difficulty with digestion, we have learned that food intolerance may have broader effects, including possible contribution to heart and vascular health. It is increasingly apparent that food sensitivities can yield low grade inflammation. We know that inflammation, if persistent, may contribute to atherosclerosis (hardening of the blood vessels).

PB: What is the difference between food sensitivity and allergy?

Deanna Fisher: Food allergy is an IgE immune system response typically characterized by hives, shortness of breath, upset stomach, and in some cases, anaphylaxis. Common food allergies are nuts, shellfish, wheat, and dairy. Food sensitivity is characterized by digestive disorders, migraines, obesity, chronic fatigue, aching joints, skin disorders, and behavioral issues. Those intolerance symptoms are often identified as individual problems, thus treating the symptoms, not the cause.

PB: How do we identify which foods are causing adverse reactions?

Deanna Fisher: An elimination diet is one way. Top allergen foods such as gluten, dairy, eggs, and soy, as well as fast food and processed foods, are eliminated for 30 days. After 30 days, add back one food group at a time. Be aware of how you feel. If there are no adverse reactions, that food was not the culprit. An easier way is to find a practitioner using a specific blood test, such as the ALCAT test, which tests specific foods against a person’s white blood cell response to inflammation. This test offers accurate results in minimal time.

PB: What is gluten and should we avoid it? Are there alternatives?

Deanna Fisher: Gluten is a specific protein in common grains such as whole wheat, rye, barley, and their derivatives. If you have a gluten intolerance, avoid it. Otherwise, it may create an immune-mediated reaction causing damage to the small intestine. This does not allow food to be properly absorbed. Even small amounts of gluten may cause health problems. Damage can occur to the small bowel even in the absence of symptoms. Great alternatives are whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa, millet, and amaranth. Also, eat more whole foods instead of foods in packages.

PB: Do you have the sense that prevention of cardiovascular illness truly is a frontier?

Dr. White: Yes, there is much to be done in pioneering the assessment and prevention of cardiovascular wellbeing. Increasingly we are aware that cardiovascular health requires whole health. Not only are basic lifestyle principals important, but so too are personal recommendations that are dependent on individual attention, such as food sensitivity tests. Eventually we will learn more about the genetic basis for some of our conclusions.

Vessel Health is located at 10601 4th Street NW, Albuquerque, NM 87114. Vessel Health focuses on prevention and a proactive approach to circulation and personal wellness.