Editor’s Note: We sat down with Michelle Schirra, CN, MS to discuss how diet and nutrition can play a role in reducing pain, inflammation, and other spondyloarthritis symptoms. Michelle is part of an allopathic and functional medicine team at WellHealth Medical Center in West Hills, CA. Our thanks to Michelle for lending us her time and expertise.

Spondylitis Plus: What are your clients generally hoping to accomplish when they come to you?

Michelle Schirra, CN, MS: Most of our patients seek us out because they have been what we call “doctor shopping,” and are very frustrated with traditional medicine. Most patients are looking to accomplish one thing: TO FEEL BETTER. We have specific protocols we use for many situations such as food allergies, gut or gastrointestinal issues, diabetes, arthritis, chronic fatigue, insomnia, intercystial cystitis (inflammation of the bladder), SIBO, candida … just to name a few. Our approach is to hear their story, understand how their symptoms started, and design a path to begin their healing process with a slow but methodical approach. My part of the practice involves nutrition, individualized diet plans, supplementation, rebuilding their G/I system and healthy lifestyle tools.

SP: Are you currently treating anyone with spondyloarthritis?

MS: Yes, we currently have two patients.

SP: Could you walk us through the steps you and your colleagues would generally take with a new spondyloarthritis client?

MS: Well, as we know, spondyloarthritis is an inflammatory rheumatic disease that typically attacks the spine and other joints. The patient’s first visit will be to see Dr. Tigalat Shalita, DO, so he can assess the situation and get lab work if needed. We use the Genova G/I Effects stool test, and the Genova Nutra-Eval test to screen for nutrient deficiencies, and the food antibody /allergy test to screen for abnormal immune responses to over 90 foods. Next, they are usually referred to our osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) specialist Dr. Christian Dellacorte for her hands-on approach to the pain, and to further diagnose. She feels their tissues, and works hands-on to provide pain relief where possible. She will assess their situation, review their test results, etc. and refer them to me to start the nutritional component. I always start the patients with an anti-inflammatory diet, and usually an anti-inflammatory shake to reduce the load on the immune system. After reviewing their test results, we will begin to treat any pathogenic bacteria that have been found in the stool that can be causing the gut microbiome to be out of balance, possibly leading to further problems. After a few weeks on this protocol, I will have them follow up and we evaluate their progress and move slowly through each step of the protocol. We have found that when moving slower, we
get better, longer lasting results. Each patient is an individual, so there is no one set process. It typically takes 9 months to a year to reach the 80-85% mark of feeling better.

**SP:** Are there specific foods that you recommend those with spondyloarthritis try reducing or cutting out?

**MS:** Yes, I take the patients off inflammatory and high allergen foods such as sugar, processed foods, gluten and starchy carbs (pasta, breads, potatoes) red meat, caffeine, alcohol, dairy, and egg yolks.

Then I begin the patient on an anti-inflammatory diet used for many inflammatory diseases to bring down their gut inflammation and calm the body’s response mechanism. Patients with spondyloarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, their bodies are usually very stressed trying to manage the pain, and this diet can help to calm things down. I often recommend an anti-inflammatory shake we carry in our office to supplement and blast the body full of nutrients to speed up the process a bit.

**SP:** Are there foods and supplements that you suggest that they add, or eat more of?

**MS:** I ask them to increase their leafy greens such as spinach, kale, chard, cilantro, celery and salads, to eat more berries, papayas, beets, sweet potatoes, lean proteins such as whitefish and salmon, and some chicken. A note here on those who have IBD along with spondyloarthritis -- (both of which are inflammatory diseases) -- adding leafy greens can be very irritating to the gut of those with IBD, so in this case, I would have them add these foods very slowly, in very small portions, and cook or lightly steam everything. No raw veggies for this population.

When it comes to supplements, I generally recommend Curcumin/Tumeric, Vitamin D, Fish Oil (unless the patient’s diet already includes a sufficient amount of fish) and a good multi-vitamin with phyto nutrients (plant based nutrients.) In some cases I will also suggest a probiotic if needed. These would be the essentials. I like to incorporate many other products as we are working together and I see their needs.

**SP:** What are your thoughts on the Mediterranean diet for those with spondyloarthritis?

**MS:** That is a good question and I do love the Mediterranean diet for the greens, olives and olive oils, lean proteins, and low starch carbs; however, it still includes cheese, and it being a high allergen food for many, I do not like cheese products for those suffering with arthritic pain. Cheese is high in fat and sodium. It is a dairy product and sometimes contains lactose, which is a sugar some patients do not tolerate; it can lead to gas and bloating. Cheese also contains casein, which is the protein portion that many people are allergic to.

**SP:** What about a plant based diet?

**MS:** I love plant based diets… or whole food diets. When you are eating a plant based diet you have eliminated many of the additives, food dyes, and preservatives that we feel are adding to the G/I issues we are seeing so often. Plant based foods ramp up B vitamins, potassium, magnesium, etc. which we need for our cellular production and overall health, along with increasing antioxidants which protects our immune system. However, I am not a complete advocate of a vegetarian diet…I feel you can eat a plant based diet along with healthy lean proteins. I feel it is difficult to get enough protein from plants and the necessary amino acids for muscle building or maintaining lean muscle without animal protein.

**SP:** Is this way of eating something people generally need to stick with? Is this a life-long diet? Or can certain foods be reintroduced after a period of time?

**MS:** Many of the added, anti-inflammatory foods I do recommend that patients continue to keep in their diets, but we can carefully re-introduce some foods that have been eliminated back into their diet after months of being on a gut rebuild protocol. I would prefer to see the patient and assess when this is appropriate, because every rebuild is different, as is each person.

**SP:** Lastly, with the Holidays approaching, do you have a few favorite healthy, anti-inflammatory holiday recipes to share with our readers?

**MS:** Yes! Many people can feel deprived on this diet since they have to give up bread and sugar…two big treats we love, especially at the holidays, so I am sharing a “Chocolate Covered Macadamia Nut Fat Bombs” recipe from the Simply Keto Cookbook below, and would really suggest looking up and trying the “Garlic Herb Paleo Grain-Free Dinner Rolls” recipe from Paleorunningmomma.com.
Chocolate Covered Macadamia Nut Fat Bombs: (THESE ARE TO DIE FOR!)

Ingredients:
1/4 cup stevia–sweetened chocolate chips (Lilly’s or Enjoy Life-dairy free)
1 tablespoon macadamia nut oil (MCT oil)
Coarse salt (I use pink Himalayan or sea salt)
24 raw macadamia nut halves

Directions:
1. In a small microwave-safe dish, microwave the chocolate chips for 50 seconds or until melted. Stir until smooth. Then add MCT oil and a pinch of coarse salt. Mix until blended.
2. Place 3 macadamia nut halves in each of 8 wells of a truffle mold or mini muffin pan or in each of 8 mini baking cups. Spoon some of the chocolate mixture into each well or baking cup, completely covering the nuts. Sprinkle additional salt over the chocolate.
3. Transfer the mold or baking cups to the freezer for a minimum of 30 minutes, until chocolate is solid.
4. Store extras in a zip-top plastic bag in the freezer for up to 6 months.

** truffle mold can be ordered online. They work great in these because they pop out very easily.

My Favorite Holiday Roasted Vegetables:

Ingredients:
1 large sweet potato
1 large yam
2 large onions
½ pound mushrooms
1 large bell pepper
4 large carrots
4 cloves of garlic, peeled

Olive oil
2 teaspoons fresh or dried oregano
2 teaspoons chopped fresh parsley
¼ cup fresh chopped basil
½ teaspoon pepper
¼ teaspoon salt

Directions:
Preheat oven to 325.

Wash all the vegetables and cut or quarter them into pieces of equal sizes. Leave the cloves of garlic whole. Drizzle a small amount of olive oil in the bottom of a 9x11-inch baking dish and layer the veggies on the bottom. Sprinkle the herbs, salt and pepper on top of the veggies and drizzle a little more olive oil on top.

Bake for up to 1 hour or until tender. About halfway through the cooking time, stir the veggies so they do not dry out, making sure they are covered with oil. Keep an eye on them; you want them to be soft and crunchy, not dry. Cooking times may vary.

Michelle Schirra is a Clinical Nutritionist at WellHealth Medical Center in West Hills, CA. She received her BA in Liberal Arts from the University of Houston and later returned to school to obtain her MS in Science & Nutritional Counseling. Michelle has practiced functional medicine with Dr. Tigaral Shalita and Dr. Christian Dellacorte for the past 9 ½ years. Michelle works with her patients by helping guide them through a process of rebuilding their bodies with healthy nutrition and working to reduce pain and symptoms. She is a cat lover and enjoys spending time with her family, exercising, traveling and snow skiing. You can contact Michelle at michelle@wellhealthmedical.com.

Please note that SAA does not endorse or recommend any specific medications, diets, or products for spondyloarthritis and always advises that you seek the counsel of your physician before initiating treatment.