

Natural Digestive Balance

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, M.D.

Our digestive system has the amazing task of continuously creating our physical bodies out of the food we eat. At the same time, it must reject and eliminate any harmful or undesirable materials we consume. This material interface between Gaia and each individual occurs at a rate sufficient to completely replace all the body's physical substance every 40 days. Thus, the expression: "You are what you eat" is true literally as well as figuratively.

The inner surface of the human digestive tract is separated from the body's internal environment by a deeply folded, protective mucosal barrier. Its surface area is the size of a large vegetable garden. It is an active ecosystem inhabited by a variety of beneficial bacteria. These work together with enzymes and acids to digest and assimilate the nutrients that we need for health. In fact, the number of microorganism cells living in a healthy, balanced digestive system is comparable to one's total number of "human" cells!

The process of digestion starts at the teeth, which tear and grind up food. It continues in the mouth, which secretes saliva to coat the ground-up food with digestive enzymes. At the same time, crucial electrical and chemical signals are sent to activate the rest of the system. Digestion then continues in the esophagus, whose powerful rhythmic contractions transport food to the stomach, where acid, enzymes and mechanical mixing prepare it for final processing.

The food is then propelled to the small intestines, where it is mixed with digestive secretions from the gall bladder and pancreas. These, along with the action of a variety of beneficial bacteria break the food down into individual nutrient molecules. Finally, transport systems in the walls of the intestines bring these nutrients into the bloodstream. Immune system cells inhabiting the intestinal walls actively patrol this final border between the external and internal environments, assuring that only beneficial nutritive materials can enter the body. Any indigestible or unwanted material is moved onwards to the colon for eventual elimination via the anus.

Maintaining digestive balance and health above all depends on eating a varied diet of whole, fresh foods. High fiber foods, such as whole grains and fruits and vegetables are especially important. It's good to drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water a day. One should minimize consumption of fried foods and highly refined sugars and starches. Regular use of nicotine or alcohol is especially harmful. Sometimes one has to search deep within to uncover and change the causes of self-destructive eating behavior in order to make necessary lifestyle changes.

Remember: You eat what you are!

Because of the intense influence of emotions on digestion, it's important to eat slowly and in a relaxed state. Always pause to give thanks for the earth's nourishing gift of food.

When the digestive system is in proper balance, digestion occurs smoothly and without our attention. When this balance is lost, a variety of troublesome symptoms can occur. These can be acute and obvious, such as gas, cramping or bloating after eating certain foods, or chronic, such as ongoing constipation, diarrhea or heartburn. In Western cultures such as our own, these problems are epidemic, and have resulted in a huge industry of symptom relieving drugs and organ removing surgeries. We've all seen advertisements urging us to stop indigestion with antacids, or to prevent this symptom by taking acid-blocking medicines before we indulge in foods that cause heartburn.

Unfortunately, in all health imbalances, suppressing symptoms or removing troublesome body parts, such as the gall bladder, often results in further progress of the underlying disease. If the cause of imbalance is not corrected it continues to progress, eventually surfacing elsewhere in the body.

For example, regular use of acid blockers can further weaken digestion and accelerate disease progress, since adequate stomach acid is vital for proper digestion. It's also needed to maintain a beneficial balance of our allied intestinal bacteria. Other drugs that commonly weaken digestion include aspirin, ibuprofen and similar pain pills, which can damage the protective lining of the stomach. Antibiotics, while sometimes needed for treating serious infections, will kill beneficial as well as harmful bacteria. These can be taken with acidophilus supplements, which help rebalance the gut's ecology.

Indigestion is the sensation of burning, gas and bloating caused by irritation of the esophagus and stomach. It's often triggered by stress or specific foods. In addition to adopting healthy eating habits, it may be necessary to identify and eliminate one's personal allergenic foods. You can try eliminating suspect food groups one at a time, or discuss this with your health care provider for specific advice.

Herbal medicines helpful for temporary relief of the symptoms of indigestion include Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*), Mint (*Menta sp.*) and Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*). These are best taken as a relaxing tea after meals. If nervous tension and stress are significant, it's best to practice deep breathing relaxation exercises before eating. Nervine herbs such as Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) or Skullcap (*Scutellaria laterifolia*) may help. When gas and bloating are problems, try adding carminative herbs, such as Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*).

Chronic, untreated indigestion may progress to cause structural injury to the digestive tract, including esophagitis, gastritis and peptic ulcers. Ulcers, which are erosions in the gut's protective mucosal lining, allow digestive enzymes and acid to begin digesting the digestive organs, often causing intense pain.

Teas made with soothing demulcent herbs, such as Marshmallow (*Althea officinale*) and Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) facilitate short-term healing of ulcers. Don't use licorice if you have high

blood pressure or fluid retention. Slippery Elm bark (*Ulmus fulva*) is another excellent demulcent herb, but years of indiscriminate harvesting have depleted this wonderful healing tree from our forests.

Symptoms of digestive imbalance can also surface in other parts of the body. This is because weak digestion results in deficiencies of essential vitamins and minerals, inhibiting immune function and healing. Also, chronic gut inflammation allows undigested allergenic substances to leak across the intestinal barrier into the bloodstream, where they are carried throughout the body. These may contribute to inflammatory disorders such as arthritis, environmental sensitivities and eczema and to emotional problems, including chronic fatigue syndrome, depression and attention deficit disorder.

Poor nutrient absorption and gut inflammation can often be remedied by eliminating specific allergenic foods from the diet and by use of digestive stimulant herbs. These include liver tonics, such as Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), Oregon Grape root (*Berberis aquifolia*) and Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and "bitters" tonics, which stimulate secretion of digestive enzymes. Important bitters include Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and Gentian (*Gentiana lutea*). Sometimes, the short-term use of digestive enzyme supplements is also helpful.

This overview is presented for education only. For herbal advice regarding persistent symptoms consult a qualified herbalist or health care professional. The mindful use of herbal medicines specifically promotes a greater harmony between human culture and Mother Earth. Ultimately, it is this partnership that brings success in all healing endeavors.

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