

# Your Digestive Health - Links to Disease

You really are what you eat!

As a natural health practitioner I feel that it is vitally important for everyone to be knowledgeable about his or her own personal health. Too many people leave it up to their health care practitioners to "look after them" and wait for obvious reasons to seek help. It is important to understand that when there is something wrong in a certain part of your body gradually everything will be effected...each organ's healthy function is integral to the whole body functioning at an optimal level.



## **Did you know that the health of your digestive system could affect every part of your body?**

Your digestive system must be healthy for a healthy 'you!' Would you believe that most diseases and illnesses could be related to your gastrointestinal tract (GIT)? Some of you may be thinking "well there's nothing wrong with my stomach or bowels...but I do have something wrong with me and I am not sure what it is". In many cases you may not be experiencing any "stomach" upsets or at least they aren't predominant enough for you to notice. Typical signs and symptoms of decreased gut function are:

- Cramps
- Gas
- Bloating
- Flatulence
- Burping
- Heartburn
- Constipation
- Diarrhoea.

Other signs of problems: too light or too dark coloured stools, blood and/or mucous in the stool, a floating stool or undigested food in the stool. Yes...what comes out of you is telling you something about your health!

**A comprehensive stool sample is a great way to find out about your health.**

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## How does your digestive system work?

The main functions of the digestive system are to break down and absorb nutrients, proteins and fats from your diet to give you energy, vitality and keep your body protected from pathogens (a disease carrying agent). The digestive system distinguishes foods as proteins, carbohydrate or fats. Proteins are partially broken down in the stomach while carbohydrates and fats are broken down and digested more in the small intestine. These foods are broken down with the help of gastric and digestive juices released by the stomach, liver, pancreas, the gall bladder and good gut bacteria. These nutrients are then transported into the nearby blood vessels to be picked up and transferred to the rest of the body! This is a very complicated and delicate transition that happens over about six and a half meters of small intestine!

If you are not getting enough of these juices in the first place then your body is not going to be able to absorb the nutrients properly - this can be the start of many health problems. After the nutrients have been absorbed and the waste from the nearby blood vessels has been absorbed back into the bowels you now have a waste product that has traveled down into the large intestine to then be excreted (it's a pick-up drop-off kinda thing).

## What can go wrong with your gut?

**It is now evident that so many different diseases can be linked to your food intake and digestive system.**

- IBS (irritable bowel syndrome): IBS is a common condition in which the large intestine, or colon fails to function properly causing symptoms such as abdominal pain and distension, indigestion, nausea, flatulence, loss of appetite, increased bowel movements with pain, diarrhoea and or constipation and an excessive amount of mucous in the stool. This is usually caused by stress, food allergies or lack of fibre.

Health care professionals commonly label patients with this term when they don't really understand what is going on with their patient, hence the use of the word syndrome. This is unfortunate because there are usually some very defined problems when the body is looked at thoroughly. Many people who have been diagnosed with IBS could actually be suffering from things such as food intolerances, an overgrowth of bad bacteria and gut dysbiosis.

- Food intolerances: can your body tolerate wheat, gluten, cow's dairy, sugar, alcohol and even fruit? Food intolerance occurs when your body has an inability to process a particular food, but the signs and symptoms are not always obvious. With food intolerances there is a slow onset reaction, hours, days or even weeks. It is also thought to be an immune system response. The GIT in some people is simply unable to produce appropriate enzymes for normal breakdown of the foods, particularly the protein molecules. If the food passes through unprocessed, or lingers in the gut it will start to ferment and produce excess gas. In some cases protein fragments rupture the lining of the intestine allowing foreign particles into the bloodstream. And disease spreads!

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- Food allergies: much more immediate responses occur so people tend to do more about it. You can be born with a food allergy or you can acquire it during your life. A food allergy is a rather fast response (minutes) by the body's immune system to a perceived invader. Signs or symptoms are typically immediate, dramatic and visible: coughing, sneezing, vomiting, migraines, watering eyes, rashes, swelling tissue, hives – or in severe cases an anaphylactic shock which requires emergency intervention.
- Diarrhoea, constipation, reflux, nausea and gallstones; Some of them are symptom of intolerance and some are not but all of the symptoms of intolerance can also be symptoms of many other bowel diseases or illnesses. Symptoms are the body telling us something is wrong and it is up to a health care professional to piece together ALL the information including symptoms to make a diagnosis for treatment.

## IBS or food intolerance?

Someone may have intolerance or be having an allergic reaction to a certain food. The symptoms you experience fall under the category of the symptoms in IBS. These symptoms are treated allopathically with anti-diarrhoea, anti-spasmodic and anti-inflammatory drugs. If care is taken to further investigate, and factor out some of the usual suspects such as wheat, gluten, dairy, sugar and alcohol we (therapist and patient) can eliminate the problem altogether by eliminating these foods. Treatment can then be sought to heal the gastric mucosa and hopefully re-introduce these foods back into the diet in moderation.

For natural health care practitioners IBS is either a case of someone who is affected in their bowels by stress or it's food intolerance, food allergy or it is simply a lack of fibre. Some times it can be all three.

## Do you have any of the following bowel problems?

Coeliac disease, Ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, Depression (lack of correct nutrients reduces production of gut hormones such as serotonin: serotonin plays an important role as a neurotransmitter in the modulation of anger, aggression, body temperature, mood, sleep, human sexuality, appetite, and metabolism, as well as stimulating vomiting), PMT, Chronic fatigue syndrome, Cold's and flu's, Diverticulitis and Hernias.

- Coeliac disease: an abnormal immune response in the small intestine to a protein called gluten which in turn causes damage to the surrounding intestinal tissue. Gluten is found in grains such as wheat, rye, triticale, barley, and in very small amounts, oats. This response happens in the small intestine and causes symptoms such as diarrhoea, malnutrition, and weight loss; symptoms in children include abdominal bloating and bulky, very foul-smelling stools. Having this disorder can also be linked to being lactose intolerant.
- Ulcerative colitis: a non-specific inflammatory response which presents itself with lesions in the colon causing symptoms such as bloody diarrhoea, low-grade fever, pain in the lower right abdomen, loss of appetite, weight loss, flatulence and a feeling of unwellness. Note that in ulcerative colitis as well as Crohn's some heavily debated causes are antibiotic over use, Infectious agents such as rota virus, Epstein-Barr virus, cytomegalovirus virus and myobacteria.

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- Crohn's disease: inflammation through out the entire bowel wall including up into the mouth. This may also be defined by small inflammatory lesions but not always. Symptoms of this disease are occasional bloody diarrhoea with cramps in the lower abdomen, mild abdominal tenderness, weight loss and fever. Fissures, haemorrhoids, fistulas and abscesses may accompany this.
- Depression: one of the reasons depression can be related to a digestive disorder is because of the inability to uptake tryptophan via the GIT and/or not getting enough from dietary sources. Tryptophan is an amino acid needed for the synthesis of serotonin. Serotonin deficiency can be a major factor in depression.
- PMT: PMT is strongly associated with decreased digestive function for many reasons. Some of these being; a decrease in nutritional factors, decreased serotonin, a diet high in sugars and refined carbohydrates which contribute to high and low blood sugar levels, decreased liver function leading to reduced oestrogen detoxification and clearance.
- ADHD: briefly, ADHD is related to inadequate digestive function from factors such as sugar, food additives, nutrient deficiencies and food allergies.
- Chronic fatigue syndrome: can be effected by decreased digestive function by many factors such as a chronic Candida infection, food allergies, hypoglycaemia, poor nutrient absorption, poor diet and impaired liver and bowel detoxification processes.
- Cold's and flu's: a poor immune system can be everything to do with poor digestive functioning. As mentioned earlier one of your primary immune defence systems is in your GIT, if this is not functioning optimally i.e. filled with lots of good bacteria then it is easy for pathogens to enter the body.
- Diverticulitis: is a condition where the colon wall has been weakened and faeces become lodged in little pockets called diverticula. A diet low in bowel nutrients and fibre can greatly contribute to this. Symptoms include: lower abdominal pain and cramping, constipation or diarrhoea and a sense of fullness in the abdomen. In more severe cases a fever may be present as well as tenderness and rigidity.
- Hernias: a hernia can result from abdominal muscle wall weakening and a piece of intestine slides through the abdominal muscle into the groin or upper thigh area. This can happen when the abdominal muscles weakens because it is protein-deficient. Eating more of the lower fat sources of protein, which include chicken breast, fish and soy can help strengthen the muscle tissue. While this therapy won't heal an existing condition, it can help prevent a re-occurrence or an initial hernia from developing.

Some very closely related disease processes are:

- asthma, allergies, eczema, psoriasis, systemic lupus, scleroderma, rheumatoid arthritis and many other autoimmune diseases.

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## You are what you eat!

How your food intake really does affect your health!

Ok this is a big one and it is mainly due to what you do and don't eat or put into your mouth. The old adage you are what you eat could not run more true! When you don't eat the correct foods that provide your gut with the nutrients it needs to keep the mucosa lining strong and healthy you leave yourself in a vulnerable situation. Your primary line of defense from disease starts in the gut.

## How you can ruin your digestive system

- Poor diet
- Smoking
- Alcohol
- High sugar consumption
- Caffeine
- Environmental pollutants
- Common chemicals found in many of our foods such as herbicides, pesticides, colouring agents and other additives as well as parasites
- Stress
- Lack of nutrients
- Antibiotics
- Decreased liver function
- Over eating
- Lack of digestive enzymes
- Lack of fibre
- Insufficient amount of fluids

Damage the lining of your bowel and you will be helping the overgrowth of bad bacteria, which then push out the good bacteria (probiotics).

## Good versus bad gut bacteria

Probiotics are the good or healthy bacteria found in the intestines. Probiotic means pro-life. These little microbes help your gut function by helping you digest nutrients, protect against bad bacteria, aid the growth and health of your gut as well as play an important role with strengthening the bowels own, very important, immune system. They also help in the production of vitamins, hormones and digestive enzymes. Some of the more commonly used probiotics you may of heard of are Lactobacillus acidophilus, and Bifidobacteria bifidum and B.longum. When you don't have a healthy amount of these good bacteria it allows for the bad bacteria to take over, damaging the integrity of your gut lining – and disease starts!

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