

Digestion: A Churning Question

Gastronomic Warfare. It's relaxing to watch the swirling, gurgling bubbles that fish thrive on in tropical fish tanks. But it's a different matter when it is happening in your gut. Is there relief from the burping, belching, bloating, indigestion and bowel trouble that plagues up to 10 million Americans and 20 percent of adults worldwide? Many digestive and bowel disorders have their root in our cultural shift away from dietary fiber, exercise, and social connectedness. Frenzied, fast-paced, isolated lifestyles combined with fatty fast foods, sugary snacks, and inactivity has taken its toll on digestive health, causing a sharp rise in what are called "functional bowel disorders."

"Functional bowel disorders" include irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, diarrhea, and bloating. There are many causes of bowel and digestive disorders. Always work with your physician for specific diagnosis and treatment of GI conditions.

Digestion Basics. Our digestive system, like many systems in nature, works best in orderly rhythms and cycles. Regular hours for eating, sleeping, relaxation, exercise, and other routines promote mental, physical, and digestive health. The following practical tips can help improve digestion and bowel function—so you can enjoy the bubbles in your favorite fish tank—but not experience their distressing effects in your gut!

Menu Do's and Don'ts. Dietary recommendations for functional bowel disorders include higher fiber intake combined with a lower fat diet.¹ A diet rich in fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains such as oatmeal, brown rice and other plant foods have a "bulking effect" that promotes regularity and reduces constipation and diarrhea.

Meals high in saturated fat and cholesterol promote gastritis, or inflammation of the stomach lining.² Plant foods are high in nutrition and low in fat. Dietary fiber reduces the risk of gastritis and risk for inflammatory bowel disease. These foods provide an environment for healthier gut bacteria, called microbiome, that enhance gut, brain and immune health.

Hot spicy foods, alcohol, caffeine, and high sodium promote inflammation and work against digestive health. Regular times for eating combined with a high fiber diet and exercise lower inflammation and promote healthy peristalsis, the wavelike movements that move digested matter along the GI tract.

Meal Timing and Other Tips.

- **Regularity.** Skipping breakfast and frequent snacking tend to increase total calorie intake and add pounds. Frequent eating interferes with the ability of the stomach to process the next meal.³ This can cause indigestion, discomfort, and gas. Frequent eating at all hours is linked to colon cancer,⁴ and night-time eating is associated with acid reflux and poor quality sleep. A large evening meal can worsen blood sugar levels in type 2 diabetics the next morning.⁵
Try this... Eating a hearty, whole grain breakfast with fresh fruit and nuts and reducing food in the evening is linked with better weight control, mood and mental function.⁶ The old adage is: “Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a queen, and supper like a pauper.”
- **Rapid eating.** “Wolfing down” a meal is a common cause of indigestion and stomach upset. It is also linked with poor blood sugar control⁷ and stomach cancer.⁸
Try this... People who eat more slowly eat less and therefore consume up to 200 fewer calories a day. Chewing food well is linked with better mental function and mood. Nutrient availability and digestion are also improved with slower-paced eating and well-chewed food.
- **Reduce portions.** Studies show that when we eat “just a little bit less” than what it would take to feel completely full it aids digestion and even extends life. Eating less reduces indigestion and acid reflux.
Try This... Take smaller portions and stop eating before your stomach feels “stuffed” or even just shy of completely full. You will notice less of a “mental fog” or feeling of listlessness after meals.
- **Replenish water.** Drinking water between meals instead of consuming large amounts of fluid at mealtime leaves more room for healthy food choices and aids digestion.
Try This... “Charge” your system with a glass of warm or room temperature water each morning. Add a little lemon for zest. To reduce acid reflux, experts recommend waiting an hour after eating before taking liquids, and eating and drinking no later than three hours before bedtime.⁹

Mood and Motion. There is a strong “brain-gut” connection that links emotional health with digestive health. Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression are associated with IBS, abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, and stomach ailments. Managing stress, relaxation exercises, and physical exercise help lower stress, improve mood and mental processing, and ease depression—all of which are good for mood-related GI problems.

Intense exercise such as running can worsen IBS symptoms. Gentle yet cardio-stimulating exercise is best, such as brisk walking. Find times for exercise when your intestines are the “quietest” and increase duration and intensity slowly.

The Living Word

The Bible teaches us that there is a “time and a season” to every purpose under heaven. Regularity in eating times, healthy choices, controlling stress, and connecting with positive people all work together to create emotional and digestive stability. Just as systems in nature and biology have orderly patterns and an ultimate plan, God has a wonderful plan and purpose for your life. He invites you now: **“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” Revelation 3:20.** In the same way that eating good food at regular intervals eases digestive ailments, feeding on the Word of God every day will help smooth out life’s path and connect you with the Source of eternal life.

Visit us at LifestyleMatters.com or call 1-866-624-5433 for your resources to build a better brain, body, and lifestyle.

¹ American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons

² Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology 2001;21(6):991-6.

³ Appetite 2007;48(2):199-205.

⁴ Int J of Cancer 2011, April 25 [epub].

⁵ J Diabetes Comp 1998;12(2):61-64.

⁶ Am J Epidem, Jan 2008; J Am Diet Assoc 2005;105(9):1383-9.

⁷ Prev Med 2008;46(2):154-9.

⁸ Oncology Reports 1998;5(5):1191-4.

⁹ WebMD 2000 Health News.