

[IMAGE]

Your Digestion and Your Health

By Isaac Eliaz, MD, LAc, MS

Your body's many systems work closely together to maintain optimal health, so when one system is off balance it can trigger a domino effect, potentially igniting a cascade of chronic health complications. One system that is particularly responsible for overall well being is your digestive system – a strong, yet delicate ecosystem that controls the presence harmful invaders and maintains digestive and overall health. To achieve this impressive feat, your GI tract relies on the presence of good bacteria, specialized immune cells and a complex network of neurological and hormonal components. In fact, this 30 foot long tract is a major headquarters for immunity, neurological health and more. Digestive health directly impacts your immune health, and vice versa, since 70-80 percent of your immune system is actually located in your digestive system. Your gut is also home to one of the largest concentrations of mood-altering neurotransmitters such as serotonin. And now researchers are discovering how beneficial micro flora (friendly bacteria) do so much more for our state of being than we previously believed.

When your digestive system is not functioning properly, it can result in poor nutrient absorption/malnourishment, and lead to a number of chronic problems and symptoms, including acid reflux, indigestion, irritable bowel disease and others. But it can also directly impact overall health as well as the health of your immune system, nervous system, hormonal health and more. In order to truly enhance your physical, mental and/or emotional health, it's important to also understand how your digestive system is connected to immunity, energy, mood, and even behavior.

Immune Health, Probiotics and Mood

Your Digestion - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Your immune system is an important part of digestive health, as it is comprised of cells, proteins, tissues and organs that all work together to defend the body against bacteria, toxins, infections, and diseases. Gastrointestinal immune cells are a vital part of the lymphoid branch of immunity, which secretes lymphocyte cells to attack harmful invaders. These gut-lymph tissues include specialized areas called Peyer's Patches, and other gut immune cells, which all work to identify and kill any pathogens, toxins or other health-robbing substances we may have ingested.

In addition to specialized immune cells, your GI tract is also home to numerous species of micro flora or "good bacteria," which help prevent the overgrowth of harmful microbes such as bacteria, yeasts and parasites. Good bacteria are also critical for overall immunity, as they have been shown to enhance the function of Natural Killer immune cells. Probiotics also form a barrier on the intestinal wall, thus serving as a powerful line of defense to prevent pathogens and germs from being absorbed.

The many strains and species of probiotics or good bacteria in our digestive tract are vital to our health for a number of reasons. They assist in digestion, manufacturing vitamins and protecting from the overgrowth of disease-causing organisms. Exciting new research also suggests that each person's internal ecosystem of friendly bacteria is unique, and can influence our neurology and mental states, including the development of our brains during infancy. Bacteria colonize the gut in the days following birth during a sensitive period of brain development. Research shows that micro flora in the gut can influence behavior throughout our lives by inducing changes in the expression of certain genes that control brain and neurological function. Pre-clinical studies have likewise shown that higher levels of beneficial bacteria in the gut can reduce anxiety, depression and neurotic behavior, and even combat the effects of stress.

The Gut-Neuroendocrine Connections

The neuroendocrine system (branches of the hormonal and nervous systems that work closely together) also plays an important role in digestive and overall health. Your gastrointestinal system is the most abundant source of regulatory neurotransmitters and neuro-peptides outside the brain. An example of this is the fact that serotonin, one of the brain's chemicals that influences mood, actually has its highest concentrations in the gut. Scientists and researchers are currently studying the numerous links between our nervous system, hormones and immune system. The gastrointestinal system serves as rich ground for observing these connections.

Digestive Herbs and Nutrients that also benefit Mood, Immunity, Hormones & Energy

One interesting link is the fact that many digestive-supporting herbs and supplements also work to improve brain and neurological function, hormone balance, immune health and more. Supplements are especially important for digestive health, as they can offer significant and relatively fast-acting support for components of your digestion that are not functioning optimally. The following is a list of key nutrients that support not only digestive but other connected areas of health:

- **Probiotics and Prebiotics:** These are two of the most important supplements you can take to help restore healthy digestion. Probiotics provide live strains of friendly bacteria that are crucial for digestive, immune and neurological health, and prebiotics ensure that your friendly flora are provided with a nourishing environment in which they can thrive.
- **Zinc:** An important nutrient for digestive health, which also plays critical roles in hormone regulation, immune health and neurological function.
- **Chinese Cardamom:** Offers numerous benefits for digestion, increases antioxidant levels and boosts immunity. Also helps to combat unhealthy cellular growth and balance hormones with the compound Indole-3 Carbinole.
- **Cinnamon:** Soothes digestive discomfort, improves digestive capacity, boosts immunity, and balances blood sugar.
- **Ginger Root:** Improves digestion, reduces inflammation and purifies GI tract, increases antioxidant levels and boosts immunity.
- **Fish Oils:** Reduces inflammation and help heal GI tract lining, improve nutrient absorption, balance hormones, improve neurological function and boost immunity.
- **Proteolytic Enzymes:** Increase digestive capacity and nutrient absorption, boost immunity and increase vital energy.

Additional Tips for Improving Digestive Health and Well Being

There are many factors that influence the health of our digestive system. Some of the most common causes of digestive discomfort include poor diet, late meals, rushed eating, food allergies and most of all, stress. Simply taking the time to slow down and eat healthy foods in a mindful way can greatly improve digestive health and relieve tension. The following practical tips can help you improve overall digestion for optimal health:

- Include an abundance of fiber in your diet from fresh fruits, vegetables and whole, unprocessed grains
- Avoid processed foods, commercial meats and trans-fats (unhealthy fats)
- Test for food allergies and sensitivities with your doctor
- Refrain from eating two to three hours before bedtime
- Drink plenty of filtered water and herbal teas for proper hydration
- Find healthy ways to relieve stress such as meditation, exercise and laughter

- Practice yoga for improving digestive function and reducing stress
- Limit your use of over-the-counter and prescription drugs
- Limit caffeine and alcohol, which damage friendly bacteria

The Gluten-Free Movement

If you have ongoing digestive or immune issues, it is possible that you may have an undiagnosed gluten sensitivity, which is common for many people. Gluten-dense foods can interfere with digestive capacity and have also been found to contribute to the onset of inflammatory conditions, autoimmune disorders, neurological and behavioral illness, skin diseases, osteoporosis, chronic fatigue, and a host of other degenerative conditions. A growing number of people who present such symptoms have tested negative for gluten intolerance or Celiac disease, an autoimmune condition where any intake of gluten damages the lining of the small intestine. However, after following a strict gluten-free diet for even as little as a week or two, their symptoms clear up dramatically.

Time Tested Wisdom Validated by Science

These intriguing connections confirm what traditional healing systems have proposed for thousands of years – that individual digestive ecosystems play a large role in how we look, feel, think and act. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) teaches that there are direct relationships between different systems of the body. Western medicine is uncovering many of these same relationships, such as the complex gut/brain connection, from a scientific standpoint. These striking parallels between modern science and ancient healing wisdom will continue to unfold as our research-based understandings of human physiology continue to shed new light onto time-tested philosophies of health and healing.

Broad spectrum health benefits are common to many natural therapies. In the case of digestive health, however, the seemingly diverse effects offered by many digestive remedies give us a more in-depth perspective on the direct connections between gut health, immune health, brain function and overall well being. For optimal health and wellness, listen to your gut!

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