

Trust Your Gut Feeling



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

Ask most people “What does your digestive system do?” and they’ll answer “Digest the food I eat.” That’s true, but it’s really just one of several roles our digestive system—more accurately called the Gastro-Intestinal (GI) Tract—plays in our bodies. The GI tract runs from the mouth to the anus, and includes the stomach, small and large intestine. It’s an interface between the outside environment (food and drink)

and our internal biology, and is designed to extract nutrients from our food and to remove harmful substances from our bodies. When it’s not in good working order we can be subject to disorders ranging from occasional heartburn to gastric ulcers, cancer and autoimmune diseases. Unfortunately, GI problems are common. In fact, more Americans suffer from digestive disorders than from heart disease, AIDS and cancer combined.

The GI tract actually has four primary functions that support our good health, much in the way 4 sturdy legs support a heavy tabletop. And just as for a heavy table, if one supporting leg breaks, the other legs take more stress and tend to break as well. When the “legs” of our GI tract collapse, our health is critically affected. Let’s consider the four functions and how to keep them strong:

Function #1: Digestion

Digestion and absorption of food is the function we all associate with the GI tract. At the stomach, large food particles are broken down into macronutrients (proteins, fats & carbohydrates) and micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc.) for the intestines to absorb. Improper diet or inadequate natural digestive agents in the stomach can cause heartburn, bloating and gas, and trigger additional problems further along in the GI tract.

It’s interesting to note here that about 90% of heartburn cases are a result of having too little stomach acid rather than too much—contrary to what the antacid advertisements would have you believe. The stomach requires an extremely acid environment (pH of 2-3) to do its job of releasing enzymes and bile to digest fat, protein, and minerals like calcium. Taking an antacid actually stops the digestive process by turning off the stomach acid that releases critical digestive agents. Then, instead of food being broken down and absorbed, it sits and essentially rots in the warm moist environment of the stomach. It is actually the acid formed by the rotting food that is the cause of indigestion! It can be a dangerous cycle; extended use of antacids can allow the rotting food acid to cause ulcers, which leads to more stomach sensitivity, then to more antacids, more rotting, more acid and so on.

A better way to deal with indigestion is to consider supplementing at mealtime with aids such as digestive enzymes that work with the stomach’s natural process. If one has existing ulcers in the stomach, they must be healed before using such aids to avoid discomfort.

Function #2: Elimination

Keeping a body functioning in a healthy manner is actually a very dirty job. The average person eats 30-50 tons of food over a lifetime, and likely ingests toxins with every bite. The indigestible parts of all this food and the associated toxins must be removed to keep us functioning well. (Rather like taking the garbage out of your house.) Additionally, many of the biochemical processes in our body have dangerous by-products that must also be removed from our bodies via the GI tract. The longer these dangerous substances sit in the GI tract, the more chances they have to re-enter the body and damage the GI tract and other vital organs. Ideally we should “take the garbage out” 2-3 times per day. How best to keep things moving? Drink lots of water, eat a plenty of natural fiber, and exercise. These three simple strategies encourage elimination, thus removing harmful substances before they can cause problems.

Function #3: Microflora Balance

Your lower GI tract is the site of an active microscopic farm! We humans actually require the assistance of beneficial bacteria, yeasts and other micro-organisms to digest and absorb some of our food for us. These tiny inhabitants also help regulate blood sugar and immune functions, and produce vital nutrients and vitamins. (Over 80% of our immune function occurs in the GI tract.) Certain situations allow unfriendly visitors (Candida, fungus, parasites, etc.) to take over our “farm”. When such imbalances occur, one may experience recurrent GI infections, chronic diarrhea (or constipation), and even seemingly unrelated symptoms such as anxiety, chronic sinus congestion or halitosis. To offset microflora imbalances, eat a diet rich in vegetables and whole grains. If you have taken wide spectrum antibiotics, had GI surgery, use acid-suppressing medications, are under stress or have any chronic GI symptoms, supplement your diet with a good probiotic. It will re-introduce beneficial microflora to your system, and reduce the impact of conditions that are known to adversely affect microflora balance.

Function #4 Gut Integrity

Maintenance of Gut Integrity is probably the least familiar of the four functions of our GI tract. When functioning well, our intestines form a barrier between what is inside the GI tract and the rest of our body. When excess inflammation is caused in our gut by food allergies, gluten sensitivities, infectious agents, microflora imbalance, drugs or other causes, a condition called intestinal permeability (aka leaky gut syndrome) occurs. This allows larger food particles, toxins and other harmful substances to enter our bloodstream, and can lead to compromised liver function, bloating, Crohn’s or Celiac’s disease, ulcerative colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, skin disorders, and food sensitivities. Eliminate toxins, reduce stress and support the other GI functions to improve the condition.

The GI tract is a complex and mighty contributor to good health. Listen to your “gut feeling” and keep it in top condition.

Until next month...Heal well, be well...naturally!

K.S.

(Dr. Kerry Sauser, ARNP, ND, PhD, practices functional health care at the Natural Health Center in Atlantic. Her offices are located in the Complementary Care Center at the corner of 2nd and Linn Street. The CCC is open to the public and hosts a natural food store, and health care services including, massage, Ortho-Bionomy, digital thermography, reflexology, hypnosis, and acupuncture.)