

Gut & Digestive Health

IS SOMETHING WRONG with your inner tube? The inner tube of life that is your digestive system? It is likely that you suffer from (or have suffered from) some type of digestive disorder—irritable bowel, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, heartburn, reflux, gas, and things too gross to mention in print. And you are not alone. Over 100 million Americans have digestive problems. The number three and seven top selling drugs in America are for digestive problems costing us billions and billions of dollars. There are more than 200 over-the-counter (OTC) remedies for digestive disorders, many of which – most unfortunately – can create additional digestive problems. Visits for intestinal disorders are among the most common to primary care physicians.

And that's not even the worst news. Most of us do not recognize or know (including most of your doctors) that digestive problems wreak havoc over your entire body leading to allergies, arthritis, autoimmune disease, rashes, acne, chronic fatigue, mood disorders, autism, dementia, cancer and more.

So having a healthy gut means more to you than just not being annoyed by a little bloating or heartburn! It is central to your entire health. It is connected to everything that happens in your body. That's why I almost always start helping people treat chronic health problems by fixing their gut. Later I will tell you how to find out if you have a problem with your gut (though many of you won't need me to tell you – your gut will speak for itself), and how to create a healthy digestive system. First let me explain why your gut is so important!

Good gut health

The health of your gut determines what nutrients are absorbed and what toxins, allergens and microbes are kept out, and therefore it is directly linked to the health of the total organism. Intestinal health could be defined as the optimal digestion, absorption and assimilation of food. But that is a big job that depends

on many other factors. For example, the bugs in your gut are like a rain forest – a diverse and interdependent ecosystem. They must be in balance for you to be healthy.

There are five hundred species and 3 pounds of bacteria in your gut. With more cells that you have “human” cell and more DNA and RNA than in the rest of your body; it’s a huge chemical factory that helps you digest your food, produces vitamins, helps regulate hormones, excrete toxins and produce healing compounds that keep your gut healthy. Too many of the wrong ones like parasites, yeasts or bad bacteria, or *not enough* of the good ones like lactobacillus or bifidobacteria can lead to serious damage to your health.

Many diseases that seem totally unrelated to the gut, such as eczema or psoriasis or arthritis, are actually caused by gut problems. By focusing on your gut you can get better.

Your entire immune system (and your body) is protected from the toxic environment in your gut by a layer only one cell thick. This thin layer covers a surface area the size of a tennis court—yet it’s basically containing a sewer. If that barrier is damaged, you will get sick and create an overactive immune system, producing inflammation throughout the body.

And then there is your second brain, your gut nervous system. Your gut, in fact, contains more neurotransmitters than your brain. It is highly wired back to your brain and messages travel back and forth. When those messages are altered for any reason in any direction – from the brain to the gut or the gut to the brain – your health will suffer.

Then, of course, your gut has to get rid of all the toxins produced as a byproduct of your metabolism that your liver dumps in through the bile, and if things get backed up, you will become toxic.

And in the midst of all of this, your gut must break down all the food you eat into its individual components, separate out all the vitamins and minerals and shuttle everything across that one cell thick layer into your bloodstream for you to stay healthy.

Why your gut may be in trouble

Even in perfect world our gut has a hard time keeping things balanced. But in our world there are many things that knock our digestive system off balance.

What are they?

- Our low fiber, high sugar, processed food, nutrient poor, high calorie diet that makes all the wrong bacteria and yeast grow in the gut leading to a damaged ecosystem.
- Overuse of medications that damage the gut or block normal digestive function – things like anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, acid blocking drugs, steroids.
- Chronic low-grade infections or gut imbalances with overgrowth of bacteria in the small intestine, or yeast overgrowth or parasites, or even more serious gut infections.
- Toxins damage the gut such as mercury and mold toxins.
- Lack of adequate digestive enzyme function – which can come from acid blocking medication use, or zinc deficiency.
- Stress can alter the gut nervous system causing a leaky gut and change the normal bacteria in the gut.

It is so important to understand that many diseases that seem totally unrelated to the gut, such as eczema or psoriasis or arthritis, are actually *caused* by gut problems. But by focusing on the gut you can get better.

One of my patients who suffered from eczema, a weeping, red, oozing, scaly, itchy rash all over her body, is a perfect example of someone who saw doctor after doctor, who was given salves, lotions and potions, steroids and antibiotics and never addressed the underlying cause of her problem. This 57-year old woman had severe, unrelenting eczema for eight years. She ate a high-sugar diet, and had a history of frequent vaginal yeast infections. When I saw her, I checked her gut and found she had a leaky gut; the barrier was not working and she developed 24 IgG food allergies. Her stool had no healthy bacteria and an overgrowth of yeast. She also had very high blood antibodies against yeast. So I just helped her gut improve by having her stop eating the foods she reacted to, told her to stop feeding the yeast by cutting out sugar and refined carbohydrates (which they thrive on) and killing the yeast in her gut with antifungal medications and herbs. Then I put back in healthy bacteria, and healing gut nutrients. Her eczema disappeared for the first time in eight years and stayed away!

How to get gut health

So how do you keep *your* gut healthy?

- Eat whole unprocessed foods with plenty of fiber: vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. Eat real food, mostly plants, as Michael Pollan, author of the *Omnivore's Dilemma*, so simply put it.
- If you think you have food sensitivities try an elimination diet. Cut out gluten, dairy, yeast, corn, soy and eggs for a week or two and see how your gut feels and what happens to your other symptoms.
- Treat any infections or overgrowth of bugs like parasites, small bowel bacteria or yeasts.
- Take digestive enzymes with your food.
- Take probiotics, healthy bacteria for your ecosystem.
- Take extra omega 3 fat supplements, which help cool inflammation in the gut.
- Use gut-healing nutrients such as glutamine and zinc.

If you want to be healthy, you have to get your gut working properly!

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