



Following Your Gut to Good Health:

A Close Look at
Digestion

For generations, medical experts thought the digestive system was pretty simple when compared to other body systems. It's only been in recent years that the digestive system has hit the prime time and gotten the attention it deserves, with experts and research finally revealing the true power and impact of the digestive system on our overall health and well-being. But how does it all work, how do we know if our digestive system is working well, and what can we do to keep this busy system healthy? We'll explore all these topics to ensure you keep your GI tract *and* your health on track.

»» How It Works

For most of us, it's been a long time since grade school when we learned all about our body systems. It's probably time for a refresher on what our digestive system is and how it all works.

The digestive system is comprised of the gastrointestinal tract (GI tract), liver, pancreas, and gallbladder. Measuring a whopping 9 meters, or nearly



30 feet, your GI tract runs from your mouth all the way to the end of the road (to be discreet) and also includes the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, and large intestine. In perfect harmony, with the help of some friends in the nervous and circulatory systems, these organs work together to perform the critical function known as digestion.

»» An Apple, Digested

Most of us know the basics... we eat, swallow, digestion happens, and we later excrete waste... what else is there to learn? Digestion is actually pretty fascinating and fairly complex, so we're going to take a closer look at the process. Let's pretend you want to eat a delicious apple – we'll follow it from start to finish as we learn about the various steps along the digestive journey.

1. As the apple sits on your plate, your mouth begins to get things moving at the start of digestion. Before the juicy apple ever hits your mouth, saliva begins forming, which helps break the apple down so it's easier to swallow. Next, you'll take your first crunchy bite.

2. After you chew and swallow, the next stop is the esophagus. This pipe-like organ connects the throat to the stomach, which does a LOT of the digestive duty including storing food, breaking the apple down into liquid form (known as chyme), and emptying into the small intestine.

3. Your apple-turned-chyme hangs out here in the small intestine for as long as four hours. This is where the critical breakdown work occurs that allows your body to absorb all the healthy nutrients in the apple right into your bloodstream.

4. From here, the liver takes over by filtering out harmful waste and deciding which nutrients will be put to work immediately and which will be saved for later.

5. At long last, the large intestine – an area that includes the appendix, cecum, colon, and rectum – begins its work. Here, water is absorbed, turning chyme into stool for the last stop before everything heads out of the body (this step happens in the bathroom...).

6. Congratulations! Your powerful GI tract has officially – and efficiently – finished digesting the apple. While it sounds like an exhausting process, your body does the majority of this hard work while you go about your daily routine.

»» Digestion: A Powerful Process

Responsible for getting all the nutrients your body needs to stay healthy, digestion is a seriously powerful process

that takes approximately 40-50 hours. The body's digestive process breaks down critical nutrients – such as carbohydrates, proteins, fat, water, vitamins, and minerals – and allows them to be absorbed and used for energy, growth and cell repair.

From the time you eat to the time you eliminate waste, your digestive system is working incredibly hard, aided by hormones and nerves. Hormones are made by cells that line your stomach and small intestine, and they control things like the production of digestive juices, as well as the transmission of signals to the brain that communicate when you're full or hungry. Nerves play a role, too, by sending signals to various parts of the body such as the brain and gut muscles – all of which help with the complex process of digestion. Other digestive helpers include bacteria (known as gut

microbiota, which we'll talk about in detail later!) and blood.

Now is the time to pay attention to this powerful system – particularly if you're healthy and want to stay that way. What most of us don't consider often enough is the power of what we put (or don't put) into our mouths, and we may not always listen when our digestive system is clearly trying to tell us something may be wrong.

»» How Is My Digestion?

Too often, we take our digestive system for granted until there's a serious problem. Paying careful attention to your body and noticing subtle changes can help you identify if there's a problem before it persists or gets worse. Digestive problems can manifest in so many ways, but here are a few of the most prevalent symptoms.

Did You Know?

Men tend to digest their food more quickly than women. In fact, a study conducted by The Mayo Clinic measured digestion time and found that men were able to get everything through to the large intestine in an average of **33 hours**, while women came in at **47 hours**. Why? Some experts think it may be due to the fact that women's colons are longer than their male counterparts, which is most likely because it needs to navigate around female reproductive organs.



Signs of a Digestive Problem

- **Tummy Troubles** such as gas, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, or heartburn.
- **Weight fluctuations** including unexplained weight loss or weight gain.
- **Sleep problems** including insomnia or chronic fatigue.
- **Skin problems** including redness/rosacea, eczema, psoriasis, or irritation
- **Mental concerns** such as anxiousness, irritability, or trouble concentrating.

If you experience any of these symptoms on a regular basis, it may be time for a digestive health tune-up!

➤➤ The Gut Health Connection

Good gut health has become a popular topic lately, but what does it really mean? Research over the past twenty years has demonstrated an undeniable connection between our digestive health and our immune system. Gut health (or lack thereof) has been linked to the most prevalent digestive problems including irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel diseases like Crohn's and ulcerative colitis. It has also been linked to numerous other autoimmune conditions, obesity, mood and mental health changes, endocrine problems, skin conditions, and even some cancers.

So, how do you achieve and maintain a healthy gut? Your best bet is to keep your *gut microbiome* happy and balanced. Your gut microbiome



is a medical term used by Dr. E.M. Quigley in a study published in the 2013 *Journal of Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, highlighting the vital role of the bacteria in your gut on your overall health. There are literally hundreds of types of bacteria living throughout your digestive tract (aka "gut") at any given time. While it may sound

unpleasant, many of these bacteria are actually good for you, enhancing your immune system's performance. While much of your microbiome makeup is developed at birth and shortly thereafter, diet and lifestyle also play a key role.

➤➤ The Natural Path to Good Gut Health





What are some healthy habits that contribute to a happy microbiome? We're glad you asked, as there are many things you can do to enhance your digestive health. Here are just a few of the many steps you can take to keep your digestive tract performing optimally.

Eat for digestive health.

Diet plays a critical role in your digestive health. Staying away from high-fat, high-sugar, and processed foods is a great place to start. Instead, eat wholesome and high-fiber foods such as legumes, oats, bananas, and berries – all of which have demonstrated positive effects on digestive health. If you're more adventurous, try fermented foods such as kimchi, sauerkraut, yogurt, and kefir – which are great natural sources of probiotics. Similarly, foods rich in collagen such as bone broth and salmon are good for your gut.

Consider taking prebiotics or probiotics. These supplements can help improve your gut health by restoring healthy bacteria and improving the balance of your gut microbiome. As with any supplement, you should consult with your health care provider before doing adding to your routine.

Move your body. Exercise is a completely natural way to enhance your digestion. Numerous studies indicate it can help speed digestion, improve symptoms of constipation, and may even reduce symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease.

Drink up. Water, that is. Ensuring your body has enough water will keep things moving and prevent constipation. Your body needs nearly two liters per day for optimal digestion. Stay away from alcohol which can lead to all kinds of digestive

problems, including heartburn, reflux, and stomach ulcers.

Following these tips is the first step to a healthy and happy digestive system. Finally, if you notice any changes in your digestive habits, don't ignore them. Our body – and particularly our digestive system – is often giving us information, and paying attention is a great way to maintain good health.

Sources

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