

Digestion Dos, Don'ts, and Maybes

By Cheryl Myers, *Taste for Life*



You really are what you eat. I know that is an overused axiom, but think about your body for a minute. You started life as a tiny infant, and your food built every bit of your body, providing the raw materials for more skin, more bones, more hair, more muscle—more everything. If you use substandard building materials, you may have problems with your structure.

You are What You Eat

There has been a renaissance in the appreciation of the incredible importance of quality nutrition. There is more emphasis on organic practices, non-GMO produce, the elimination of trans fats, and other healthy measures striving for the best nourishment.

I imagine many of you reading this grew up on sugary breakfast cereals, skim milk, white toast with margarine, and orange-flavored powdered drink mixes each morning. Parents believed it was part of a healthy breakfast—the TV commercials said so. Now we know more, and are (thankfully) making choices to live better—and longer—lives.

However, it is not just about your food choices and quality nutrition. You are not only what you eat—you are what you absorb. And that brings us to a discussion of digestion, and the role it plays in utilizing nourishment from the food we eat to build—and rebuild—our body.

How Digestion Works

Naturopathic physicians and integrative practitioners often state that all health begins with the gut. Our gastrointestinal system is a miracle of design. Not only does it process the food we eat, it also:

- Allows water to pass into our body
- Is a powerful immune entity
- Houses our microbiome
- Has its own “brain” that creates neurotransmitters that influence mood
- Detoxifies waste

Suggestions to Improve Digestion

Regardless of whether you are in search of more optimal health, or are trying to address a specific condition, a powerful first step is to improve digestion. Here are some simple dos and don'ts for great digestive function—and a maybe or two at the end.

Digestion Do's

- Spice it up. Not only are most spices very healthy, some improve digestion. Good spices to include are cumin, fennel, coriander, ginger, and if you like the hot stuff, cayenne peppers.
- Eat slowly and chew your food thoroughly. Whatever you don't properly chew adds strain to your digestive system that has to work a little harder to break it up.
- Consume fermented foods and other foods that contain healthy bacteria (probiotics).
- Save it for last if you eat bread. Eating bread first (as it is often served in restaurants) stimulates a larger insulin response and blood sugar spike than consuming it at the end of a meal, where the effect is blunted by the proteins and fats you have already consumed.

Digestion Don'ts

- Don't drink large amounts of icy beverages with meals. Some integrative practitioners are concerned that by chilling the stomach and intestines, you could reduce enzyme activity and slow digestion.
- Don't go to bed right after you eat, as you will have an increased risk of heartburn and indigestion. Gravity rules!
- Don't reach for the over-the-counter acid-reducing drugs and antacids on a regular basis. If you had a challenging meal—say, a chili cheese dog with onions at the ball game—it is fine to use a chewable antacid to reduce your distress. Using once or twice a month is fine, but more than that constantly suppresses your stomach acid, which sets you up for a myriad of health problems and can make your indigestion even worse.
- Don't exercise strenuously after a meal. OK, you probably won't drown if you go swimming too soon after you eat, but it is true that exercise temporarily diverts blood from the digestive tract to feed the muscles what they need, which in turn impedes proper digestion.

- Don't eat meals while watching scary movies, especially if you react strongly and feel tense during horror flicks. Popcorn at the theater may be fine, but being startled and fearful triggers adrenal activity. Your body can't tell if the threat is real or not, so it slows down blood flow and energy to the digestive tract to divert to other areas if needed to fight off a threat or run away.

Digestion Maybes: Supplements for Support

Consider supplements! If you have problems with digestion, whether temporary or chronic, there are many supplements that can make a big difference. Talk to your healthcare practitioner to make sure supplements are right for your specific issues. Here are some of the best.

- **Boswellia**

Purified boswellia with a minimum of 10% AKBA is very powerful for all kinds of gut inflammation, whether irritable bowel, Crohn's, or colitis.

- **DGL**

Deglycyrrhizinated licorice, called DGL, has the part of the plant removed that might increase blood pressure. What remains is an excellent, clinically studied choice for ulcers or gastritis.

- **Peppermint Oil**

Peppermint oil should be enteric coated for proper release in the intestines. It relaxes smooth muscle and resolves intestinal cramps, gas, bloating, and slows transit time to reduce loose stools. Some formulas also include the oil of caraway, cardamom, and coriander for an even higher level of benefits.

- **Probiotics**

Probiotics are not all created equal. Look for one that does NOT have to be refrigerated, because that means the probiotics are shelf stable. Make sure the probiotics are guaranteed to be alive at time of purchase. Some of the best and clinically studied for colon and bowel problems are Lactobacillus plantarum, Lactobacillus rhamnosus, and Bifidobacterium bifidum. If you have issues with milk products, make sure the probiotics are grown on a nondairy culture.

Learn, and Listen to Your Body

Our diet and subsequent digestive health is crucially important to all aspects of well-being. Taking the time to learn about ways to improve the function of the gastrointestinal system will have a multitude of benefits, both immediately and for years to come.

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