

The Gastrointestinal Tract and its Role in Good Health

by Teri Jaklin ND

Good digestion and a healthy gastrointestinal tract (GI) could be considered an obsession of many naturopathic doctors. Its many important functions truly make the intestines the seat of good health.

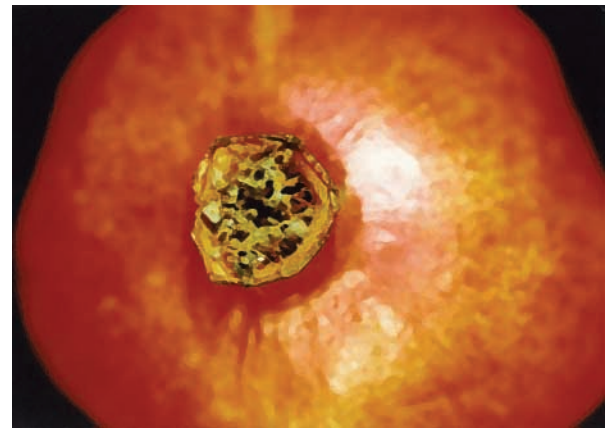
A Healthy GI

In the simplest of terms, the GI system is a long tube (with a few specialized extensions like the stomach) that reaches from the mouth to the rectum. It is designed to optimally process the foods we ingest, extract the nutrients we need, and eliminate the waste. It also functions like an “internal skin” to protect us from pathogens and allergens from the outside world. How do these pathogens and other toxins get into our systems? We eat, drink and breathe them (exotoxins), or produce them from within (endotoxins) as the consequences of poorly digested or eliminated food. This toxic barrage makes it easy to see why the integrity of the GI is a key component of good health.

How does the GI factor into disease?

The complexities and consequences of a compromised GI are VAST. As a barrier, the gut is a major center for the presentation of foreign proteins into the body. This is a big job, and an estimated 50-60 % of the body's lymph tissue surrounds the digestive tract to help “protect it” from exposure to these toxic substances. In fact, the intestine is generally recognized as the largest immune organ in the body. A thin layer of tissue consisting of tightly connected cells, with a surface area equivalent to the size of a tennis court, prevents toxins from entering our system at large. Further protection is afforded by the microflora, a layer of 100,000 billion viable bacteria – both good and bad. When these bacteria are in balance and your GI is considered stable, acute immune responses are less likely and harmful bacteria and toxins in the gut are efficiently disarmed. This combination of tissue and microflora also ensures proper peristalsis (movement of the bowels), continually primes the immune system, and presents a formidable barrier against the toxic waste in the GI from being leaked back into the system.

You can probably imagine the wide range of health issues – from mild to serious – that are a direct result of a poorly functioning digestive tract. Everything from gas and belching to low energy/fatigue, allergies, skin disorders, inflammatory conditions – like arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease,



fibromyalgia etc. Managing serious and chronic conditions like autoimmunity – multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus also hinges on a healthy GI.

A compromised GI

There are forces at work that wreak havoc on a healthy gastrointestinal system. Poor food choices and eating habits, refined and processed foods, alcohol, coffee, medications (especially antibiotics), chemotherapy, trauma, constipation, poor digestion, stress, and so on. When the GI is assaulted by some of these “toxins”, it starts to break down and the protective features of this remarkable system are compromised. The resulting dysbiosis and leaky gut are what complicate good health.

Dysbiosis and Leaky Gut

Dysbiosis is a derangement of the normal microflora - good bugs gone bad. Let's use antibiotics as an example. Antibiotics are prescribed to “kill bugs,” the problem is they are not selective – which means they kill the bad bugs AND the good bugs. Basically the microflora is wiped out. Now, using a garden analogy, if you wipe out the garden with the rototiller, what grows back first? It's not the tomato seeds it's THE WEEDS! The same thing happens in the GI. The most famous GI ‘weed’ is Candida – but there are others.

Once the microflora is disturbed, the delicate tissues that form the physical barrier are exposed causing them to shrivel and gap. It is through the gaps in this otherwise tightly connected tissue that “proteins” from the waste in the intestine enter the system leading to acute and chronic inflammation. This is called Leaky Gut Syndrome.

Dysbiosis and leaky gut have been associated with many health conditions, from autism to eye diseases. There is extensive research behind the role of the GI in diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis, also in autoimmune disease like multiple sclerosis.

While your naturopathic doctor's individual treatment plan will most likely address the health of your GI system specific to your health picture, there are things you can start now, to work toward an optimally functioning GI.

- Good digestion is key, and begins in the mouth. Adequate chewing not only breaks down food reducing stress on the rest of the system, it also sends a message for your body to start producing gastric juices.

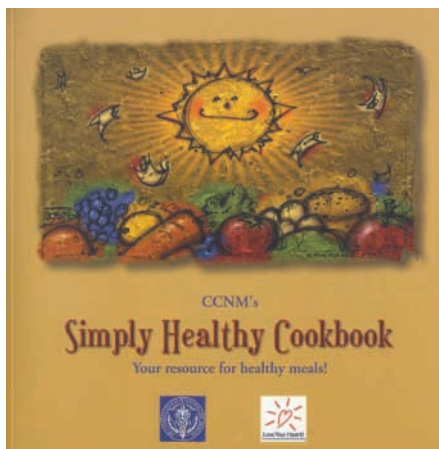
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- Practice conscious eating – relax, enjoy, chew, let the digestive juices flow. Eating in front of the TV or on the fly is not considered conscious eating.
- Listen to the natural signals of how and what to eat. If something makes you feel lousy, need to lie down, gas, bloating, diarrhea etc, then don't eat it!
- Eat a diet rich in whole foods (the more colourful the better). This will ensure you're getting lots of nutrients and enough fibre to keep things moving. 5-10 portions of veggies per day is a good place to start – include bitter veggies like endive or dandelion.
- Water, water, water.
- Apply a castor oil pack to your abdomen regularly to not only help with peristalsis, but also improve the tissues and nutrient absorption.
- If your bowels are not moving daily you may want to supplement fibre until your diet and the other activities kick in.
- Supplement with a good probiotic.

Needless to say, this list could go on and on, as could the discussion about a healthy GI system. I hope you have gained a better understanding of how a healthy gastrointestinal tract is the seat of good health, and a few steps to start you on your way.

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Curry Tofu

- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 Tbsp. unrefined olive oil
- 1 can coconut milk
- 1 lb. (450g) firm tofu, cubed
- 1 small tomato, diced
- 4 Tbsp. curry powder (use less or more, depending on taste)
- ½ tsp. cinnamon
- ½ tsp. nutmeg
- 1 cup green beans, cut into 1" pieces
- 1 cup chickpeas, drained and rinsed salt and pepper to taste crushed red pepper to taste

- In a deep pot, heat olive oil over medium/high heat. Add onions and garlic and cook until they are translucent and soft. Add curry, salt and pepper and cook for 1 minute
- Add cubes of tofu to the spice mixture and fry until lightly browned
- Slowly add the rest of the spices to the mixture while continuing to stir.
- Add the can of coconut milk. Bring to a low boil for 10 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook until they begin to break down. Then add the chickpeas and green beans.
- Bring to a simmer over medium-low heat for approximately 45 minutes.
- Additional water or coconut milk may be added if desired.

*Serve on a bed of basmati rice.

Lentil Loaf

- 1 cup brown or green lentils
- 1 Tbsp. unrefined olive oil
- 1 medium carrot, chopped
- 2 onions, chopped
- 3 celery stalks, chopped
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- 1 Tbsp. tomato paste
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1 - 2 garlic cloves, minced
- spices, to taste: chili powder, coriander, cumin, basil, thyme, oregano

- Cook lentils. When they are finished, drain and mash until smooth.
- In another pan over medium heat, add olive oil and quickly saute the vegetables and spices.
- Combine all of the ingredients and mix well. Press into a greased loaf pan and bake at 350°F for approximately 1 hour or until firm.

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