



## Poor Digestion as a Hidden Cause of Disease\*

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Kevin, age 16, lay on the couch, unwilling to move or eat, refusing school, deeply depressed. His parents were at their wits' end. They distrusted antidepressant pharmaceuticals, and hoped to find an alternative.

What worried George, age 45, was the constant tingling in his feet, and his sense that numbness was increasing daily. An MRI had revealed a healed fracture of a thoracic (rib-level) vertebra, and his MD had told him this probably explained his foot pain.

Arlene, 38, complained that there was a 'strange-feeling' on the front of her thigh—she'd never bruised or harmed it, yet each day it got more painful...and what could it be?

Charles, 69, had used antibiotics to heal bronchitis 5 months ago, but he was still tired and coughing up phlegm, and had recently begun to wheeze.

Tamara, 32, said that her menstrual periods were painful and unpredictable, plus she had a lot of PMS symptoms. Together these symptoms meant that she didn't feel well two weeks out of each month.

Linda Marie, 59, reported that she had recently developed headaches while trying to lose weight. The headaches were becoming disabling, and prevented her from exercising. She also complained of arthritis in her hands, and pain "all over" in her muscles.

It's easy to identify digestive malfunction when it's clearly the stomach or intestines that complain! But what if one's digestion seems quite all right, varies 'just like anyone else's', yet other symptoms appear and refuse to go away? Sometimes, attention to digestion turns out to be the key that opens the lock to improved health. In a moment I'll go through the cases above to make my point, but first—

### ***Did you know you have a second brain?***

It's true—and it's located in your abdomen! Your head contains your 'big brain' and your abdomen contains a huge nervous plexus, with nearly as many neurons as the brain. These are highly responsive to stress, anxiety, anger...and illness. So, trouble 'elsewhere' can easily be reflected into the gut, and similarly, gut distress easily troubles the whole body. I'm sure this is physically familiar to everyone, but if you want the scientific details (delivered in an amusing manner) see *The Second Brain*, by Michael Gershon, MD, first published in 1998.

## ***Digestion according to Chinese medicine***

Chinese—Asian or Oriental—medicine argues that the quality of our breathing and digestion is the source of our energy and strength. Breathe badly, or damage digestion, and ill health is sure to follow. The primary Organs of digestion are called the Stomach and Spleen (some people say this Chinese Organ ought to be called the pancreas). Other Organs involved in digestion also have familiar-sounding names, like Liver, and Large Intestine. Despite the apparent familiarity, these Organs are not the same as those in western anatomy. They have different jobs, for one thing, and for another, they are accessible from anywhere in the body—they are *functional* Organs, not anatomical ones. The way acupuncturists reach them is through acupoints on channels or *meridians*, which run up and down all over the body. Remember this when I explain why each case turned out to begin with digestive malfunction.

### ***Why is good digestion so important?***

At our beginning, each of our parents gives us a packet of energy which, combined, become our ‘savings account’ for life. After we are born, we must either spend down our savings account until we run out of energy, or seek fresh energy by breathing, eating, and drinking.

This energy that we take in daily becomes our ‘checking account’ to fund ordinary life. Our bodies try to minimize withdrawals from the savings account. If it is drawn down by difficult life events, illness, trauma, or surgery, we can replenish it from the checking account by wise eating, drinking, and breathing.

But: how many of us are wise about what we eat, breathe and drink? Indeed many *are* careful! We cut down on fats and sugars and red meats and French fries, increase our use of fresh foods, get our cholesterol checked, and remind ourselves to exercise...and sometimes we even take a break to meditate (breathe!). Still, for many of us, our digestive systems are under constant attack: white bread, sausages, bagels, granola bars, bacon, fast food burgers, smoking, beer, diet sodas, martinis, the office candy dish, the after-church coffee klatch...eating on the run, eating while driving, eating packaged foods, restaurant foods...the list is endless and represents a lot of potential trouble for digestion, which means for the whole body.

We’ve all heard this story before—ho hum!--...unless, of course, you don’t feel well and can’t figure out why. If that’s you, read on, and pass this article on to someone else who needs it.

### ***Getting Down to Cases***

Suzanne (all names changed) knew she had a digestive problem because she was overweight. She’d put herself on a weight loss diet, added more exercise to her regime,

and all should have gone well. But it didn't—she developed disabling headaches, body aches, and pain. It sounds complicated, and indeed Suzanne had a deficiency of Spleen Qi (digestive energy) but most importantly, she was poisoning her body by using “diet” soda and artificial sugars. Diet foods often have peculiar effects. Remember the ad about how ‘you can't fool Mother Nature’? –well, consider that when you put something sweet-tasting on the tongue, the brain understands: “food coming!” When food—that is, calories—doesn't come, the brain keeps on demanding them, and the person stays hungry. Eventually, this hunger will drive the person to eat...and so, paradoxically, *fake sugars can cause weight gain*. But there is a worse problem: the popular artificial sweetener called aspartame is a *neurotoxin*—a nerve poison. It is also addictive, and commonly causes both headaches and muscle pains. Suzanne got well when she quit using diet foods. She lost weight and her arthritis pain disappeared when she strengthened her digestive capacity with acupuncture, and added a safe combination of Chinese herbs for weight loss.

Arlene's ‘strange patch’ of skin on the front of her thigh was in the same location as the Stomach meridian. This was a clue that made her practitioner ask “Do you ever have heartburn or acid stomach?” Arlene agreed--“Since birth! How'd you guess?” Asked if she ever had headaches, she said “Yeah, right here!” rubbing her forehead, the place where Stomach-related headaches tend to hurt. In short, all of Arlene's symptoms lay along the Stomach meridian. With acupuncture care, both locally around her patch of painful skin, and distally on points to correct the function of the Stomach meridian, she soon got well.

Arlene might have complained of discomfort elsewhere on her thigh—inside, outside, back...the same energetic logic would have been applied to offer care. Consider the case of George, whose trauma was on the spine, but whose symptoms were on the outer side of the lower legs and feet. George himself could pick out the exact spots of discomfort—and they might have lain along the Gallbladder meridian (another digestive Organ), but in fact they lay along the Stomach meridian. The location of the damaged vertebra was at the same level as the back points for Stomach and Spleen. Tender points on the abdomen also referenced the Spleen, Stomach, and Liver. In this case, putting needles on the legs, and magnifying the energetic message with electroacupuncture led to rapid improvement in symptoms. In addition, George was given selected nutrients, dietary guidance, and enzymes to improve his digestion. None of this changed the fact that George had experienced trauma to his spine, but with the corrected energy flow, the effects of the trauma were minimized...and George happily got on with his life.

Unlike George, Kevin was unable to get on with life—though so young, he'd come to a halt. Turned out Kevin had a life-long aversion to food—it just tasted awful to him. So, for many years, he'd eaten a narrow diet, mostly meats and some grains. His body grew by drawing down his ‘savings account’, and at 16 he was out of energy. He was given acupuncture to moderate mood and provoke appetite, enzymes to support digestion, and herbs and nutrients to nourish his depleted core. This led to a remarkable turn-around in just 3 weeks. Kevin began eating, and suddenly found that foods he'd found disgusting in the past tasted good. With energy going in, he had some to put out—and got up off the

cough. This was a case of malnutrition causing exhaustion (“depression”) and now the healing process was well begun, though it would be some months before Kevin was completely out of the woods.

Charles’ cough-that-wouldn’t-go-away was also traced to a weak Spleen unable to ‘sort’ incoming food properly. This resulted in his body producing too much thick damp phlegm, and in boggy lungs. By using acupuncture, herbs and enzymes to clear Lung and tonify Spleen, and by modifying his diet to remove ‘damp’ and ‘phlegm’ causing foods, Charles soon recovered.

Tamara’s case of menstrual difficulties is one of an imbalanced relationship between two Organs, the Liver (in charge of storing Blood, and ensuring the smooth movement of Qi) and the Spleen (in charge of making Blood, and delivering food energy to the body). In the week leading up to her flow, Tamara was constantly sugar hungry, and had other symptoms of what Chinese medicine calls Liver Qi Stagnation including irritability, insomnia, and bloating. When the flow began, Stagnation (cramps) gave way to fatigue and weakness as she lost blood...and became Liver Blood Deficient. This cycle continued frustrating month after month. The task of Chinese medicine was to interrupt the cycle, then lead it back toward normalcy, which is ‘no symptoms’ surrounding menstruation. To help the Liver, the Spleen needed to be strong—thus during the first two weeks of her month, both Spleen Qi and Liver Blood were tonified. In the next two weeks, the Liver Qi needed to be controlled so it would not ‘overact’ on the Spleen. By continuing this pattern of treatment for several months, along with improving her diet to feature fresh whole foods, Tamara recovered: no more PMS, cramps, or weakness. What most relieved Tamara was the end of sugar craving. That one symptom had irritated her so much that the rest seemed almost ‘normal’—but now that she could look a cookie in the eye and walk away, she was happy!

### ***The bottom line***

According to Chinese medicine, good digestive health is at the center of a healthy life. Those of us with digestive symptoms already know that we need to pay more attention. But the point of this article is that many symptoms and illnesses that do not *seem* to be about digestion, *often are, at least in part*. By asking a skilled Chinese medical practitioner for help, by modifying your diet and selecting appropriate nutrients and enzymes to enhance digestion and nourish your body, you—*yes, you!*—may be able to recover from a surprising array of apparently non-digestion related complaints.