



## HEALING YOUR DIGESTION\*

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Oriental (Chinese, East Asian) medicine is a good choice for people who have digestive difficulties. If you select a practitioner who also has skills in nutritional assessment, you will be even better off.

### What Symptoms Are We Talking About?

If you have any of the following, your digestive system is not working right:

- thickly coated tongue, tongue with no coat, bad taste in the mouth
- burping; tasting your food long after you ate it
- nausea, acid indigestion, reflux
- difficulty digesting fats, sugars,...or anything else
- food allergies
- shakiness when missing meals
- sleepiness after eating
- lack of appetite, craving, raging appetite
- constipation, diarrhea, pain with bowel movements
- gas, bloating, digestive malaise
- can't lose weight
- regular use of 'diet' sodas, 'diet' foods or artificial sugars

Here are other symptoms that often have a major digestive component:

- headaches (including migraines)
- achy weak muscles
- deep and constant fatigue
- low back pain
- skin problems like psoriasis, eczema...
- rhinitis, sinusitis, asthma
- menstrual cramps, PMS symptoms
- osteoporosis,

### If You Have Such Symptoms...

If you have digestive or other symptoms, take steps to improve your situation. First, take better care of your digestive system! But many people need **health coaching** to improve their diet and eating habits. In that case, see a specialist,



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such as an acupuncturist, who can BOTH help you with symptoms and teach you ways to take care of yourself.

Here are some examples (all names are changed):

Sonya woke daily feeling sick and hungover...but she never drank alcohol, so what could be wrong? Sonya said that she got hungry before bed and liked to eat a dish of ice cream "which helps me sleep." From the point of view of Chinese medicine, ice cream is a real no-no: full of fat and sugar it stresses the gallbladder and pancreas, and being cold it stagnates digestion. Eating it before bed left her digestive system working all night, though sloooowly. By morning she was hypoglycemic...tired, dizzy, and hungover. A simple change in diet—no more ice cream before bed!--made the morning fatigue disappear. Regular acupuncture care supported her in feeling steady strong energy despite a demanding job.

Sherri had abdominal cramps, gas, and chronic constipation, even though she exercised as part of her job and consumed a high fiber vegetarian diet. Acupuncture and an herbal remedy stopped the gas and cramping, but the constipation resisted our efforts. Further analysis showed Sherri to be protein deficient...she discovered that adding a little animal protein to her diet improved bowel function and reduced fatigue. Vegetarians are often protein-deficient! I offer a balanced amino acid mix that improves protein balance without requiring animal protein.

Hank was told he suffered from reflux and was given a pharmaceutical drug to 'stop acid production' in the stomach. His reflux diminished, but his digestive malaise increased. Wasn't the pharmaceutical doing its job? The answer is 'yes—it was,' but the job it was doing was unnatural because the stomach is *supposed* to be acid. Normally, carbohydrate foods begin to be broken down by enzymes in the saliva, which continues in the stomach for 20-45 minutes. Then the stomach lining produces acid, which helps digest protein. The acid stomach contents make their way into the duodenum, where the pancreas and gallbladder release enzymes to neutralize the acidity and continue the digestive process. But if the stomach contents are not acid when they reach the duodenum, it *disturbs the whole rest of the digestive process*, resulting in a range of 'downstream' problems. The solution for Hank was acupuncture to reduce digestive pain and malfunction, plus enzymes to support the healthy function of his stomach. Soon Hank was able to stop using the pharmaceutical.

**East Asian Concepts of Healthy Digestion**



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For Oriental medicine, digestion is the core of a healthy energetic body. This Medicine notes that all our energy for life comes from breathing and digestion. Breathing brings in ethereal Qi, and as long as we live we rhythmically breathe to bring in Qi, and release waste. We can breathe more or less well, but we can't do without for more than a few moments.

This is not so with digestion. We can go days without food, or suffer a poor diet and digestion for years before we become so distressed that we seek help from specialists. Nevertheless, Chinese medicine says *digestion is as important as breathing*; we should practice *preventive care* of our digestive systems.

When you put food in your mouth you are taking in Qi in a coarse form. It goes to your Stomach where it is 'rotted and ripened.' It then becomes the job of the Spleen to sort the result and send it where it belongs. The 'purest' Qi rises upwards to serve the Lungs and Heart, and the 'food' Qi goes all around to feed the body. The remaining 'trash' is further sorted, and finally expelled through the Large Intestine. The Spleen, then, is the core digestive Organ in Chinese medicine. It works closely with all the other Organs, and there are particular patterns of malfunction associated with the Spleen. There are also particular ways one can take good care of one's digestion, thus helping to ensure the Taoist goal of 'long life.'

Consider a common situation: a middle-aged woman who has gained weight around the abdomen. I see many like this in my practice. Usually they complain of bloating, dislike of the big belly, low back pain, muscle pain and fatigue, and inability to lose weight. Some have received biomedical diagnoses such as irritable bowel syndrome, 'lazy colon,' or simply 'overweight.' Seeing such symptoms with the eyes of biomedicine, one might consider thyroid and/or adrenal insufficiency, or a resistant inflammatory process occurring in the gut. Chinese medicine doesn't use these terms but does recognize the same spectrum of complaints.

Muscle pain and fatigue relate directly to the health of the Spleen, as does a swollen draggy belly. The age of the person, back pain, and fat location suggest Kidney deficiency. Resistance to change indicates Stagnation. My typical treatment includes **acupuncture** to strengthen the Spleen and Kidney functions, and to release Stagnation and Damp. Acupuncture can also increase the rate of metabolism, help lift the sagging belly (relieve the sore back), and improve mood, making it easier to accomplish lifestyle changes. Then comes the **dietary coaching**. Actual recommendations vary, but in my office might include **guidance on improved diet**, the use of **enzymes** to improve digestion and reduce gas and cramping, **probiotics** to improve the quality of the gut bacteria, **nutrients** to supplement a faulty diet or to



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reduce the inflammatory process in the gut, and perhaps **herbs** to address particular problems such as weak muscles and sleepiness after meals, inflammation, diarrhea, or constipation. These interventions can often make a huge difference in health within just a few weeks.

### On "Diet" Foods

In our society, with our intense focus on slenderness, many people consume 'diet' foods and drinks to reduce their caloric intake. This is a poor idea for several reasons. First, the sweet taste prepares the brain for calories, and when they don't come, the brain keeps insisting until the person eats some more...and more...and more! So, to lose weight, exercise, avoid 'diet' foods and substitute whole, natural, fresh foods, especially more vegetables, nuts and fruits. Good food allows your digestive system to work as it was intended, and (unless there are significant psychological issues at work) you should soon experience a normal appetite and be able to control your intake in a healthy way.

Second, far more serious, 'diet' foods are mostly toxic foods. Sucralose (Splenda™) exposes you to large amounts of chlorine bleach, a powerful oxidant or 'aging agent'. Aspartame (Nutra-Sweet™, Equal™) is a neurotoxin, which means it attacks the nervous system. How eager are *you* to consume a neurotoxin? I remember one man of 22 who'd had diarrhea for 2 years. He was wasting away, though every biomedical test pronounced him free of 'serious' disease. I asked him what I ask every patient: "do you use diet sodas?" "Yes," he said, and added "I'm always thirsty, so I drink a lot. Maybe 12 or more a day." In short, he was addicted to diet sodas, and despite so much drinking, was still thirsty. He agreed to switch to soda water for "just a week." That week changed his life, for his diarrhea stopped just *one week* after 2 years of misery! In two weeks he felt well and had an appetite. In another case I saw a woman pregnant of her third child who didn't want to 'gain too much weight.' She was also developing asthma. Once I knew she was using aspartame—and exposing her unborn child to a neurotoxin!—I asked her to switch to water. Her asthma symptoms disappeared, and she was healthy through the rest of her pregnancy. For more information on 'diet' foods and toxicity, see, eg., [www.mercola.com](http://www.mercola.com).

### What You Can Do For Yourself

Digestive malfunction comes from two sources: poor dietary habits, and an aging gut. Anyone can change their dietary habits--it can be hard, but if the reward is to



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feel and function better, it's worth the struggle. The effects of aging can also be contained by supplementing substances whose production decreases with age, and with acupuncture, a practice that supports healthy aging. Here are tips for self-care:

- **Water** is the one best drink...no juice, soda, or caffeinated drink counts as water. Keep your body hydrated with fresh clean water, and reduce your use of other drinks.
- Eat lots of **fresh** vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, organic meats...
- Avoid 'junk' foods, processed foods, preserved foods, white flour foods, sugar in all its forms, and all 'diet' foods...
- Buy some pH paper and test your first morning urine. If it is neutral to slightly acid (7 to 6.5) your body is staying in good balance. If it is acid (below 6.5)—you need to change your diet. In the short term you can 'alkalyze' your body by drinking a very small amount of baking soda with water. Better is to alkalyze by using lots of vegetables. **Excess acidity is at the core of many disorders.** Learn more at, eg., *The pH Miracle* by Young & Young, published by Warner Wellness.
- **Once you turn 40**, begin to use quality supplements. Consult a specialist to identify appropriate nutrients that are bioavailable (actually usable by your body). Use enzymes to improve your digestive capacity. Add probiotics to improve the health of your gut. And if you are over 65, add a special enzyme preparation that helps your stomach produce the acid you need to digest your food.
- **Don't forget to exercise!** Exercise moves the gut as well as the muscles, helps release stagnation and toxins, keeps the metabolism humming, and *feels good!*

Try the recommendations offered above. If your symptoms don't improve, talk to your acupuncturist! For information on acupuncture research on digestion, search at [www.acupuncture.com](http://www.acupuncture.com), or see my text, *Contemporary Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture*, Elsevier Publ, 2002.