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## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GUT

### The Amazing Solution That Can Help Many Chronic Conditions

**W**e REALLY are what we eat—but more important, we are the foods we absorb. That's what I think about when patients come to see me feeling cranky and complaining of fatigue, poor memory, aching joints and/or moodiness. They want me to treat their symptoms, but to heal them, I have to go deeper and focus on their digestive health. *The reason:* A root cause of many chronic problems often turns out to be poor digestion and inadequate absorption of nutrients. In fact, I find that nearly every patient with a chronic condition needs to address digestion issues...and even most healthy people would feel much better if they improved their digestion.

Since I last wrote about the connection between digestion and chronic conditions in *Bottom Line Natural Healing* (September 2005), I have developed a successful protocol that heals the lining of the gut. I recommend this protocol for people with chronic digestive problems and systemic conditions related to poor digestion. It also helps healthy patients who want to improve their digestion.

#### GOOD DIGESTION...AND BAD

To understand what goes wrong with digestion, it is important to understand how it works. As food mixed with saliva enters the stomach, it is broken down into small particles by stomach acid, then by enzymes produced by the pancre-

as and bile produced by the liver. "Good" bacteria (flora) in the small intestine complete the job of breaking down nutrients so that they can be absorbed. Undigestible parts of food, such as fiber, and other waste products are pushed into the colon where they remain until eliminated.

The small intestine plays the important role of gatekeeper, allowing nutrients—thoroughly digested particles of fats, proteins and starches, as well as vitamins and minerals—to pass through its wall into the bloodstream for distribution around the body. It also serves as a barrier to prevent undigested food, large molecules and foreign substances, such as harmful bacteria and yeast, from getting through. When the lining of the small intestine becomes irritated and inflamed, it is unable to do its job properly. As a result, bacteria and undigested food "leak" into the bloodstream. Officially this is called increased intestinal permeability, but more often the problem is called leaky gut syndrome.

#### THE DIGESTION-CHRONIC ILLNESS LINK

Leaky gut syndrome wreaks havoc on immune function and nutritional status. When the gut "leaks," the immune system believes that it has been invaded by foreign bodies and goes on attack. It produces antibodies, which can inflame the gut and further damage the intestinal lining. This inflammatory response can result in the worsening of sys-

temic symptoms, such as fatigue, arthritis and headache, among others.

In addition, leaky gut syndrome decreases nutritional absorption. When your gut doesn't efficiently absorb food, you can develop serious nutritional deficiencies that worsen systemic problems. The only way to stop the cycle is to heal your digestion.

#### CAUSES OF LEAKY GUT

There are many reasons people develop leaky gut syndrome. Some causes are unique to our modern society, while others are age-old...

Poor diet. Fast foods are hard to digest, in part because their low fiber content slows their progress through the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Foods high in sugar, artificial sweeteners, colorings, preservatives and omega-6 fatty acids (from vegetable oils) may cause inflammation in the gut.

Chronic stress. The body responds to stress by going into "emergency" mode. As a result, digestion slows.

Chronic illnesses. Cancer, depression and autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis, often are associated with poor digestion.

Existing digestive problems. Conditions such as colitis, Crohn's disease and irritable bowel syndrome can cause—and worsen—leaky gut syndrome.

Common pain relievers. With regular use, aspirin, ibuprofen and other

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anti-inflammatory drugs damage the lining of the small intestine.

Acid-blocking medications. Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs), such as *esomeprazole* (Nexium) and *omeprazole* (Prilosec), reduce stomach acid. Long-term use of these drugs intrudes on the GI system's ability to properly break down food, particularly proteins.

Other pharmaceutical drugs. Certain anticancer drugs and oral steroids destroy the gut's "good" flora.

Bacterial imbalance. *Dysbiosis* is an imbalance between good and bad bacteria. A deficiency of good bacteria in the gut often occurs as a result of excessive use of antibiotics or an overgrowth of harmful bacteria.

Environmental toxins. Toxic metals in the environment, such as mercury (from seafood) and chlorine (from tap water), kill good flora.

Excessive alcohol intake. Depending on the individual, two or more alcoholic beverages daily can damage the intestinal tract and reduce absorption abilities.

#### HEALTHY GUT PROTOCOL

In addition to clearing up all kinds of digestion problems, the new protocol I have developed gives the immune system a boost. My patients tell me that they have improved energy, less gas and bloating, better concentration, less arthritis pain and fewer colds and infections.

*Another benefit:* This protocol helps people with chronic conditions cope with food sensitivities—reactions to foods containing sugar, dairy, wheat, corn or eggs that irritate and inflame the lining of the small intestine. Many holistic practitioners advise patients to identify these sensitivities with an elimination diet, in which one food at a time is avoided to determine if it is an offender. These diets can involve eliminating between 12 and 24 com-

mon foods—which can be time-consuming and stressful and deprive the body of valuable nutrients. My protocol enables my patients to eat many of the foods they want and get the nutrients they need.

I recommend taking all of the following supplements because each will have a different effect on digestion. Unless otherwise noted, they are safe for everyone, but discuss your intention to start this protocol with your doctor. Also, be sure to eat a healthful diet, avoiding alcohol, sugar, caffeine and hydrogenated fats (trans fatty acids found in packaged foods).

■ **High-potency digestive enzymes.** These plant enzymes assist in the breakdown of all types of food. Because intolerance to dairy products and gluten (a protein in wheat and some other grains) is so common, I prefer enzymes that contain *dipeptidyl peptidase* (DPP-IV), which help break down gluten and the milk protein *casein*. Try Integrative Therapeutics Similase GFCF (gluten-free/casein-free) (800-931-1709, [www.integrativeinc.com](http://www.integrativeinc.com)). Take two capsules with or at the end of each meal. Caution: These enzymes do not allow people with celiac disease to eat gluten, although they can help digest hidden gluten in foods. Avoid these enzymes if you have active gastritis or ulcers.

■ **N-acetyl d-glucosamine (NAG).** This amino sugar helps to form the mucous coating on the intestine, which protects it from contact with digestive enzymes and acids and helps discriminate between normal and unhealthy particles. NAG seems to directly reduce food-sensitivity reactions. It also may promote a healthy balance of good flora throughout the intestines. I often recommend NAG made by Allergy Research Group, which is available only through a health-care professional (800-545-

9960, [www.allergyresearchgroup.com](http://www.allergyresearchgroup.com)). Take 500 mg twice daily before meals.

■ **Glutamine.** This amino acid has been shown in several clinical studies to restore intestinal barrier function. It helps promote intestinal cell turnover, guards against intestinal infection and helps soothe inflammation of the digestive tract. My patients tell me that they have less cramping and abdominal pain. Take 1,000 mg three times daily before meals.

■ **Deglycyrrhizinated licorice (DGL).** This type of licorice root extract stimulates intestinal mucus production and has an anti-inflammatory and soothing effect on the lining of the digestive tract. Chew one 400-mg tablet three times daily before meals. One widely available, high-quality DGL is made by Natural Factors (800-322-8704, [www.naturalfactors.com](http://www.naturalfactors.com)).

■ **Probiotics.** These healthful bacteria help prevent overgrowth of yeast and other potentially harmful organisms in the intestines. They also help break down food and normalize gut immune reactions, reducing food sensitivities. (See *Bottom Line Natural Healing*, October 2008, for more details.) Try probiotics made by Jarrow (800-726-0886, [www.jarrow.com](http://www.jarrow.com))...Bio-K+ (800-593-2465, [www.biokplus.com](http://www.biokplus.com))...or DDS Multiflora (800-422-3371, [www.uaslabs.com](http://www.uaslabs.com)). Follow instructions on the label.

*What to do:* Take these supplements for two months, and then evaluate how you feel. Most of my patients notice a marked improvement in their digestion, energy level and chronic conditions. If you continue to have digestion problems, see a holistic practitioner. If you're doing well, stay on the protocol for three months or more and assess how you feel. If you have a chronic condition and this protocol helps, you can stay on it indefinitely. ■ ■