

## Digestive Woes

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The digestive tract can be a friend and an enemy. Many variables such as stressors, genetic predisposition, and unhealthy lifestyle choices can interrupt the complex process of digestion and play havoc with our stomachs.

Three simple strategies practised daily can help to manage stress for a stomach-friendly lifestyle.

### Finding the OM in st-OM-ach

The stomach should really be called our second brain, since it is so very sensitive to our emotional well-being. Calming the mind can go a long way in improving any digestive complaint, including heartburn, indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

A study reported by the American Journal of Gastroenterology in 1995 found that stress may also aggravate symptoms in patients suffering with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). The authors suggested that stress management strategies such as yoga and meditation may help improve GERD symptoms. Case reports also suggest that stress management techniques can help people suffering with IBS and IBD.

### Change the Way You Eat

It is clear that what you eat can strongly affect your digestion. Avoid greasy, fried, fatty foods. Try to limit your intake of caffeinated beverages and chocolate, as they can trigger indigestion. Eating too much at once can overflow your stomach, placing pressure on the upper valve, thereby increasing the likelihood of reflux. This contributes to heartburn, bloating, and indigestion.

Use common sense and try to eat smaller meals more frequently throughout the day. Not only will this habit support digestion, but it will stabilize blood sugar levels, improve energy levels, and promote healthier body weight.

In addition, keep a diary of foods that you eat. This process will allow you to identify food triggers that could be responsible for your symptoms. Try eliminating these possible food triggers and monitor for improvement. If you feel better when you are not eating certain foods, seek the advice of a registered dietician to discuss long-term strategies to eliminate these foods and to substitute alternate foods with nutritional equivalence.

### Herbal Helps

Explore a few of the natural health products recommended as stomach remedies. Research is growing in the use of phytomedicines in the complementary management of digestive disorders.

**Artichoke leaf extract:** Preliminary research shows that artichoke leaf extract may benefit digestion. The American Botanical Council reports that several double-blind, placebo-controlled studies demonstrate that artichoke leaf extract may significantly benefit dyspepsia, a condition associated with heartburn, appetite loss, diarrhea, constipation, nausea, and abdominal pain. This herb appears to support bile secretion and liver function, two agents in good digestion. Note, however, that people with gallbladder blockages are advised not to take this herb.

**Peppermint oil:** Enteric-coated peppermint oil preparations are showing promise with irritable bowel syndrome. According to the authors of a review published in *HerbalGram* in 2006, enteric-coated peppermint oil may be a safe treatment of choice in IBS patients suffering with non-serious constipation or diarrhea, to improve overall symptoms and quality of life. Enteric-coated peppermint oil may help to regulate the muscular contractions of the digestive tract and support digestion.

**Licorice root:** Preliminary studies show that deglycyrrhizinated licorice root (DGL) helps to manage duodenal gastric

ulcers. In a two-year comparison study of DGL with cimetidine (a conventional drug treatment) published in the journal *Gut* in 1985, the authors concluded that DGL was safe and effective for preventing ulcer recurrence. More studies are required to explore this herb's potential with ulcer treatment.

DGL is typically taken in a chewable tablet form, with natural health practitioners recommending that DGL be chewed and swallowed 20 to 30 minutes before meals. DGL may support the secretions of protective digestive agents and exert anti-inflammatory effects, possibly accounting for its soothing properties.

**Slippery elm:** Another herb that may soothe an inflamed digestive tract might be slippery elm bark, which has been used traditionally in herbal medicine to manage gastric disorders such as heartburn and ulcers. This herb is rich in demulcents and mucilaginines that are believed to coat and promote a soothing effect. Many people have reported benefits after using slippery elm, particularly with heartburn, but to date, no scientific evidence supports the use of this herb. However, it appears to be safe and there are no known contraindications with its use. Slippery elm bark powder may be found in capsule preparations with typical recommended doses of one or two capsules three times daily after meals or when indigestion occurs. Slippery elm contains fibre that may bind medications and prevent absorption. It is therefore best to take slippery elm two to three hours away from medications.

In addition to these three strategies, consult with a natural health professional or your family doctor to rule out any serious condition that may be underlying your digestive woes. Let your doctor know that you would like to explore some natural approaches, and most doctors will be happy to monitor your progress since they would only like to see you get better.

Certain digestive conditions should not be left unchecked. Long-term GERD that is not properly treated may increase the risk for serious complications, including strictures, esophagitis, and Barrett's esophagus. Associated with an increased risk for cancer of the esophagus, Barrett's esophagus may occur in a small percentage of long-term GERD patients. Be sure to seek out appropriate medical guidance if symptoms are not improving. Gastroenterologists can assess your condition and the best path for treatment.

So, be friendly to your gut and soothe its woes with regular relaxation, eating foods that are well tolerated, and using sensible natural health products to ease any discomforts.

### Three Stomach-Soothing Strategies Strategy

1. Start a relaxation program on a daily basis such as yoga, meditation, or diaphragmatic breathing. Strategy
2. Limit your intake of fried foods, fatty foods, spicy foods, and eat smaller more frequent meals. Keep a diary of possible food triggers. Strategy
3. Consider sensible use of the appropriate natural health products such as artichoke leaf extract, enteric-coated peppermint oil, licorice root, and slippery elm. Consult with your natural health practitioner for guidance and to ensure no drug-herb interactions or contraindications.

### A Word on Food Triggers

Food triggers may vary with individuals. In my practice I have seen people become intolerant to foods you least expect, such as bananas or rice. Food intolerances require detective work and the best method is a food symptom diary. Once possible food offenders have been identified, a systematic method of food elimination will confirm whether those suspected foods are indeed causing problems. Food elimination requires the guidance of a registered dietician, since avoiding foods can increase the risk for nutrient deficiencies over the long term. A registered dietician can help provide food options that are tolerated with equivalent nutrients to those foods that are to be avoided.