



Digestive wellness is within your control.

# GUT REACTION

good health isn't just a matter of what you eat, but how well you digest it

By Liz Lipski, Ph.D., C.C.N.

**W**hen we think about good nutrition, we tend to focus on *what* we eat. Even when we slip up, we know to load up on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes and soy and fish proteins. But sometimes, even when we eat well, we still don't *feel* well. Not only is that physically uncomfortable, but it's frustrating too, because we don't know what we're doing wrong.

That's because eating right is just the first step. If we can't digest the food we eat, we'll never feel our best. After all, the purpose of eating is to deliver nutrients to every cell in our bodies. If that doesn't happen, not much in our body is going to work right.

Our digestive system is a vast, complex network that affects every aspect of our lives. Did you know that two-thirds of our immune system is located in the digestive system? Or that we make 90 percent of our serotonin in our gut. And that we have more nerve endings here than in our spine?

Digestive issues are rampant in our culture. Twelve percent of Americans have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and along with the common cold and back pain, digestive illness is one of the top reasons people see a doctor. According to the Digestive Disease Clearinghouse and Information Center, up to one-half of the population has digestive problems, ranging

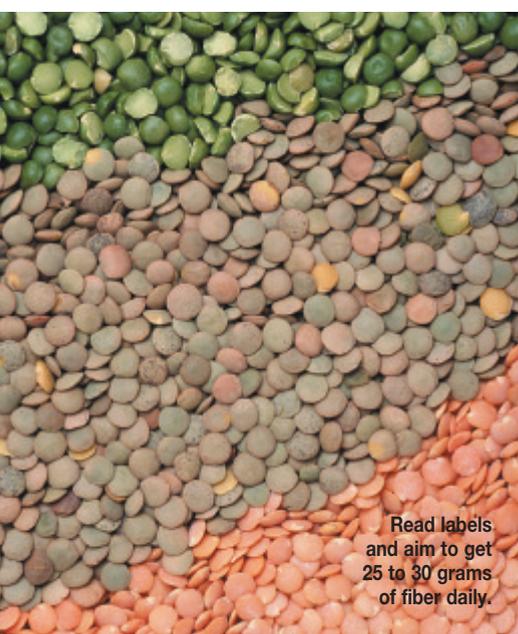
from mild or manageable—gas, bloating, GERD (acid reflux), constipation, diarrhea and IBS—to the more serious diseases like celiac, Crohn's, ulcerative colitis and cancers of the digestive system. Over-the-counter GERD medications are the most popular category of medicine, accounting for \$17.4 billion in worldwide sales.

But relax (if you can). There's plenty you can do to prevent digestive problems and to find relief. You already know some of the tips that follow; others may be new to you. The good news is that digestive wellness usually is within your control. Of course, if your symptoms persist, see a medical professional. ►

**Chew your food well.** The whole reason we have teeth is to mush our food before it hits our stomach. Many of us eat on the run or standing up, or we gulp it down before the kids misbehave. So take the time to chew your food well. Food ought to be liquefied and smooth before swallowed.

**Eat in a relaxed way.** When we're stressed, our digestion suffers. Make the dinner table a place for friendly conversation rather than for criticism or complaints. Saying grace or holding hands

quietly before a meal reminds us that we've stopped what we were doing and are now eating. When you dine alone, don't watch TV or read, which distracts you from the main event: enjoying your meal and digesting properly.



**Limit sugar and sweets.** Just cutting way back on sugary and sweet foods can dramatically reduce gas, bloating and indigestion. This includes cookies, candies, pastries, muffins, dried fruit and soft drinks—including noncarbonated ones like teas and fruit drinks. There's strong anecdotal evidence that artificial sweeteners can wreak havoc on

**Give up carbonated drinks.**

Carbonation can contribute to burping, gas and bloating. Try cutting it out for just one week and see how you feel. Replace soft drinks and sodas with mineral water or herbal teas sweetened with a bit of apple or cranberry juice.

**If your digestion is really poor, cook all food really well.**

It's easier to digest foods that are well cooked. Think soups, stews and well-cooked veggies and grains.

**Increase your fiber**

**intake.** "If you aren't having at least one healthy bowel movement each day, you're constipated," says Russell Jaffe, M.D., Ph.D., president of Elisa Act Biotechnologies. Increase your fiber intake by eating more vegetables, beans, fruits, prunes, whole grains and high-fiber cereals. Read nutritional labels and aim to consume 25 to 30 grams daily.

**Check for food sensitivities.**

Food sensitivities are different from food allergies, which cause nearly immediate symptoms like sneezing, congestion, itching, hives and tongue or lip swelling. Sensitivities can produce less obvious symptoms—which are often delayed—such as fatigue, depression, brain fog, migraines, arthritis and IBS. An easy way to self-test yourself is by eating only fruits, vegetables, fish, chicken and rice, seasoned with olive oil, salt, pepper, herbs and spices for a week or two. It's amazing how often health problems are

resolved this way. Add back foods one at a time to see what triggers symptoms.

**Use digestive enzymes.** If you feel that your food just sits undigested, try taking one or two digestive enzymes with meals. There are many good products on the market. Get suggestions from a knowledgeable person at your health food store or good vitamin shop.

**Try probiotics.** If you're bloated after meals, constipated, or have diarrhea or IBS, probiotic supplements like acidophilus can help. There are many kinds of beneficial organisms, but make sure that the product contains at least Lactobacillus and Bifidobacteria species. These beneficial bacteria support digestive and immune function, make vitamins and help our bodies to become more resilient. Yogurt and kefir are good but typically do not provide enough to help with digestive symptoms. Begin by taking 1 capsule or 1 tsp. daily and increasing until your digestion improves. Refrigerated products generally have the highest potencies. Look for products containing at least 4 billion organisms.

**Use herbs, spices and herbal teas to enhance digestion.**

Culinary herbs and spices not only make our food taste good, they also aid digestion. Spice up dishes—and your digestion—with cinnamon, nutmeg, curry, ginger, cardamom, basil, oregano and thyme. Best teas include ginger, fennel, dill or caraway seed, and mint.

**Do a cleanse.** It's a good idea to do an annual cleanse to let our digestive system rest and renew. There are many great products on the market that focus on liver and/or colon cleansing. Get recommendations from a trusted staffer at your health food store, and be sure to follow label directions. 