

Gut Health: Digestive Wellness Basics



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PLEASE READ: The information in this handout has not been approved by the FDA and does not in any way intend to diagnose or prescribe. Always consult with your health practitioner before taking any remedy.

Above this, I also recommend that you...

1. Research an herb in at least three good sources before ingesting it (see website for sources),
2. Listen to your body/intuition to determine if an herb resonates or doesn't resonate with you.
3. Take proper steps to ensure that any wildcrafted or cultivated plant is what you think it is, AND
4. Check with your pharmacist for herb-drug interactions if you take prescriptions.

Extra Safety Note: See a doctor or naturopath first for a proper diagnosis, especially if your symptoms are severe, chronic, or do not respond to natural remedies. Digestive symptoms can indicate serious health concerns like ulcers, cancer, bowel or gallbladder obstruction, or Inflammatory Bowel Disease that warrant immediate medical attention.

General Digestion Tips: If you have food sensitivities or allergies, remedies won't be able to completely undo your symptoms - you must stop eating the foods that bother you. Gluten and dairy are the most common culprits I see in my clients. A poor diet (not enough fiber, too many refined and processed foods, sugar, etc.) will also impair digestion. Focus on a whole foods diet loaded with vegetables, fruit, beans and legumes, nuts, whole grains, and perhaps also meat, dairy, eggs, and alcohol in moderation. Don't eat too much – stop just before you feel full – but don't skip meals, either. Keep your body upright during and after meals and move daily; gravity and gentle physical activity assist the travel of food through the gastrointestinal tract.

Indigestion: "Digestive bitters" are the answer to almost any situation where your digestive system functions sub par, including indigestion, excessive fullness after eating, poor digestion of fats, and constipation. That's because bitter herbs like **artichoke leaf***, **dandelion leaf and root***, and foods like **bitter salad greens*** stimulate peristalsis (the muscle action that moves food through the GI tract), digestive enzyme production, and the creation and excretion of bile. Anyone who says you only have a set amount of enzymes in your body for your lifetime doesn't understand anatomy and physiology! Your body makes new digestive enzymes from amino acids (the building blocks of protein), and bitters encourage your pancreas to produce more of these digestion-enhancing compounds, particularly if you take them over time. You can make your own blend. I particularly like those made by Urban Moonshine and Herbal Energetics. If stress is a factor, relaxing bitter herbs can help, including **chamomile**, **lemon balm**, or **catnip tea*** with meals. **Ginger**, as a food or supplement, also stimulates digestion and offers a variety of benefits throughout the body and GI tract. You may also consider taking digestive enzymes with meals.

* These herbs are easily grown/foraged in the northeast

Acid Reflux & Heartburn: The most common cause is low stomach acid, which prevents proper signaling to the sphincter above the stomach to close. Try taking one tablespoon of raw (ie: Bragg) **apple cider vinegar** before meals to see if this helps. (If you notice increased burning, do not repeat the vinegar.) This clears things up for most people. To promote healing and balance a truly acidic digestive system, I turn to **licorice** root. Licorice acts as a natural antacid while also healing and soothing gut tissue and encouraging the production of our protective mucin lining. Plain licorice tea works great; however, it can have side effects and interact with medications for some people. If you plan to take licorice frequently and are concerned about potential side effects and interactions, use chewable "**DGL**" licorice tablets as they are safer. Other soothing, healing herbs include **slippery elm bark** (lozenge, tea, or powder mixed in oatmeal), **marshmallow root***, **plantain leaf***, and **aloe** inner gel. ("Whole leaf aloe" products contain the bitter latex, a potentially troublesome laxative.)

IBS, Gas, Pain & Bloating: Bitters, vinegar, and ginger may help over time. But for immediate relief, consider chewing on some **fennel seeds*** (super cheap as a bulk spice) or taking a **peppermint* oil** pill like Peptogest. Both remedies quickly stop spasms in the GI tract, relieve pain, and move gas along its route. (The peppermint might be minty fresh on the way out.) Those relaxing, bitter teas also work well. For long-term, try taking a **probiotic** daily to balance your lower GI; I prefer brands with a coating to help pass through the stomach and release in the intestines. Also look into food sensitivities.

Constipation: Most constipation is caused by stress (which slows GI function), dehydration, not obeying the urge, poor diet, low fiber, and a sedentary lifestyle (see the "general digestion" tips). Bitters may help indirectly. For obstinate constipation, try **yellow dock*** or **triphala**. I almost never recommend strong laxatives like senna because they are habit-forming.

Learn more at www.WintergreenBotanicals.com and in Maria's *Body into Balance* book!

Often when you begin to focus on gut repair, you'll notice drastic improvements within just a few days or weeks, but the long-term healing could take several months, even a year or longer. As your gut heals, you may find that some foods are no longer problematic.

Helpful Categories of Herbs

Bitters: Bitter-tasting herbs include dandelion leaf and root, burdock root, artichoke leaf, citrus peel, tamarind, grapefruit, gentian root (sustainability concerns), wormwood (safety concerns), and bitter greens like radicchio, endive, and some of the wilder varieties of lettuce. Bitters, taken when we eat, turn on the entire digestive tract. They stimulate saliva, stomach acid production, enzyme production, peristalsis (the wave-like motion that moves food through the GI tract). Indirectly, this encourages healthy elimination and regular bowel movements. Bitters also reduce the glycemic (blood sugar) effect of food, regulate and encourage a healthy appetite, help us feel more satisfied, and reduce cravings (especially for sugar). Most Americans have too little stomach acid (and taking a proton-pump inhibitor just makes this worse), and having too little stomach acid also sets you up for conditions like SIBO and dysbiosis further down the line. If bitters seem to make your digestive issues worse, then focus on the next categories of herbs first. Try bitters again after several months once your gut is in better shape. Don't continually do anything that obviously bothers your system.

Slimers: More formally called demulcent or mucilaginous herbs, these plants often get slimy when they come in contact with water. They help coat the digestive tract, soothing it, creating a temporary protective barrier, and helping to heal damage from reflux, ulcers, gastritis, leaky gut, inflammatory bowel disease, etc. They can be taken as a tea (preferably steeped overnight) or as a powder mixed in food like oatmeal or a smoothie. My favorite slimer is marshmallow root, however slippery elm (sustainability concerns) is also excellent. Licorice root is an *amazing* slimer with additional benefits for gut healing, mucosal lining regeneration, and immune health; however, it can have various long-term side effects. The DGL form of licorice - usually available in chewable tablets - are a "dumbed down" version that is great for GI benefits without the safety risks.

Vulneraries: These are our wound-healing herbs, and you'll often hear of them being used for the skin, yet they're also beneficial for your gut lining. Plantain leaf is my favorite and quite adaptable to tea. Others include calendula flowers, gotu kola, and aloe inner gel (but not the latex, rind, or whole leaf because the bitter inner latex is an irritating stimulant laxative). Drinking bone broth regularly may also help with repair.

Gentle Astringents (& Antimicrobials): Astringent herbs tighten and tone tissues with their varying tannin contents (the same category of compounds used to tan hides to make leather). In the digestive tract, it's a careful balance. We don't want things loose and leaky, but we also don't want the lining as tough as leather or you'll lose the ability to absorb nutrients from food. Some of my favorite *gentle* astringent herbs include rose petals (which also promote good bacteria while discouraging the bad), plantain leaf (also vulnerary and demulcent), dry alder bark (also antimicrobial), and cinnamon (also antimicrobial). Berberine-rich herbs are also excellent mucosal toners and gut antimicrobials.

Spices (& Antimicrobials) : Spices are pretty dynamic medicinal plants with a wide range of health benefits, often individual to the specific spice. Generally, you can count on them to decrease inflammation, fight pathogens, relax spasms in the GI tract (gas, pain, bloating), and promote good digestion. Some of my favorite gut spices include cinnamon (particularly astringent and antimicrobial, also lowers blood sugar and fights chronic diarrhea), cloves (potently antimicrobial), fennel seeds (great for spasms, gas, and pain), cardamom (antimicrobial, antispasmodic, digestion-enhancing), ginger (antimicrobial yet it promotes good bacteria, stimulates digestion and is warming and anti-inflammatory), and star anise (antimicrobial, antispasmodic). Spices often make up 15 to 50% total of my blends, which also improves the overall flavor with chai-like properties.

Happy Gut Tea

One of my favorite ways to address gut health is to provide a blend of beneficial herbs in the form of tea.

2 teaspoons marshmallow root
and/or marshmallow leaf
1/2 teaspoon plantain leaf
1/2 teaspoon rose petals
1/4 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 thin slice of ginger
(or 1/8 teaspoon dry ginger chips)
2 cardamom pods, lightly crushed
4 clove buds
2 cinnamon sticks
(or 1-2 teaspoons cinnamon chips)
1/2 teaspoon licorice (optional)
1/2 teaspoon burdock (optional)

Combine the ingredients in a 32-ounce container such as a mason jar or French press pot. Cover with boiling water and let steep overnight or all day. Strain and drink over the course of the day. It will keep refrigerated for a few days and can be drunk hot or cold.

Adjust ingredients as you like. Once you know how you like it, you can make a two-month supply of dry mix. Simply swap "teaspoon" for "cup" in the recipe, using 1/8 cup cardamom and 1/8 clove. Store the dry mix in a 64 oz storage jar with a tight-fitting lid, and use 2 heaping tblsp/pot.

Visit the Links page of www.WintergreenBotanicals.com for Local & Online sources for *herbs*, *supplies*, *informative articles... upcoming classes, consults, and to buy my books!*
