

KEYS TO GOOD DIGESTION 23 August 2005

By Nutritionist Bonnie Fisk-Hayden

Digestion is not the most glamorous aspect of nutrition. However it *is* the key to good health and affects every aspect of bodily functions. If the nutrients you are ingesting are not being absorbed, then your body is not getting the fuel it needs to run efficiently. Our bodies were not designed to eat the diet that is currently consumed in this country, nor were they designed for the sedentary lifestyle most of us lead.

Enzymes that are inherent in our food before it is cooked actually start the digestive process before we eat, such as in ripening fruit. As we chew the food slowly and completely, the enzymes in our saliva mix with the food and the food enzymes to accelerate the breakdown of the food before it reaches the stomach. Once there, it mixes with the stomach juices and is churned about before moving into the duodenum where more digestive juices from the pancreas and bile from the liver break it down even further. As the nutrients move through the small intestine they should now be small enough to pass through the permeable wall of the intestines to enter the bloodstream and be absorbed into the cells where they are converted into energy. This is a best-case scenario of digestion.

Of course, there are many pitfalls along the way that can cause digestive problems. One of the most common is cooked food. Cooking destroys the enzymes in foods, causing our bodies to work ten times harder to produce extra-strength digestive juices to break down the food into usable nutrients. Couple this with incomplete chewing and you have a recipe for digestive discomfort. One way to get around these problems is to add supplemental digestive enzymes before or during each cooked meal to take some of the burden off the body, or to eat something raw at the beginning of each meal.

One problem with our modern diets is the amount of refined foods we consume. These foods are very low in natural fiber and can literally gum up the works, coating the walls of the small intestine with impenetrable residue, and preventing proper nutrient absorption. Generally, highly refined foods are also high in sugar, which creates an imbalance in the gut between the good bacteria and the detrimental ones. We always have a mix of these flora, but the proportion needs to be in balance for good digestion to take place. Supplementing with probiotics such as acidopholus once or twice a day can speed up this rebalancing, or by including raw, fermented foods in your daily meals, especially if you have been taking antibiotics. If the bad

bugs are proliferating, primarily a yeast called candida albicans, they can grow into mycelia or tentacles, penetrate the gut and spread throughout the body as a fungus. This creates a climate for larger molecules of food to pass into the blood that the body may perceive as invaders, thus setting the stage for food sensitivities and allergies. Candida and other yeasts thrive on sugar, as do cancer cells. Some common symptoms of yeast overgrowth are strong sugar and/or alcohol cravings, fatigue, poor memory, numbness, muscle aches and or weakness, insomnia, joint pain, abdominal pain, constipation or diarrhea, bloating, belching or intestinal gas, loss of libido, mood swings, headaches, chronic rashes, psoriasis or hives, rectal itching, and mouth blisters. If you have several of these symptoms, you may consider an elimination diet. It is very helpful to do this with the support of a healthcare professional who knows what to expect and who can guide you through the process with proper diet, supplements and emotional support.

Eating a diet high in fiber, with lots of raw vegetables, a moderate amount of fruits, grains in their whole form that have not been ground into flour, and one that is low in sugar can help. For a sugar substitute you can try the herbal sweetener stevia or xylitol, which is a sugar alcohol and can be used in cooking in the same proportions as sugar.

Bonnie Fisk-Hayden is a nutritionist practicing in Point Reyes Station. She is almost finished with a Masters Degree in Holistic Nutrition. She will be giving talks on Blood Sugar Control September 22 and How to Beat the Flu on November 17 at the Dance Palace at 7:30 p.m. She can be reached at 663-8411.