

Digestion

Advice for the good health of your digestion

by Alison Cullen



How to Use Herbal Remedies Safely

This guidebook is not intended to replace medical advice. You should consult a Healthcare Professional if you have any condition which is of concern. For best results when taking herbal remedies, follow the guidelines below.

If the product you have has an in-pack leaflet then you should follow the instructions and advice on the leaflet and product packaging.

If the product does not come with an in-pack leaflet then you should follow the instructions and advice on the product packaging. The following general advice also applies to products with no in-pack leaflet.

- If there is any doubt as to the nature of the problem please consult your Doctor for a diagnosis.
- Do not use when pregnant or breastfeeding unless under the supervision of a Healthcare Professional.
- Do not use for children under 2 years of age unless under the supervision of a Healthcare Professional.
- Do not exceed stated doses.
- Do not use alongside medication with the same action eg, a tranquillizing herb alongside tranquillizing medication.
- Do not take more than 3 herbal remedies concurrently.
- Stop taking herbal remedies 14 days before surgery.

Working as a nutritionist, I hear a great deal about the behaviour of people's guts and am frequently astounded by what they consider to be normal behaviour therein.

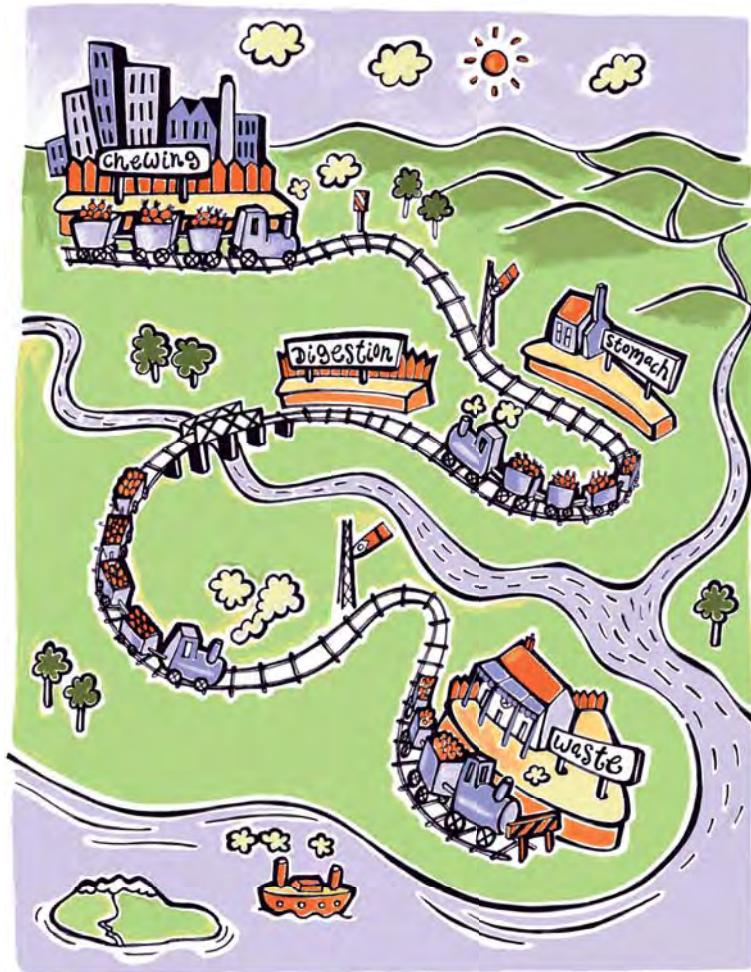
More staggering still is the sang-froid with which many people regard the dilatory nature of their bowel movements.

'My bowels move regularly, once a week, whether they need to or not'... is often the attitude. Most people, indeed, see nothing wrong with this situation. However, as the colon is the main exit route for food waste and toxins, naturopaths would have to disagree with any hint of complacency over the functioning of this vital organ. Ideally, according to naturopathic principles, when two or three meals are being eaten daily, the bowel should move at least once or twice a day. If this shocks you, you should probably read on...

Let us take a look at what the digestive system should be doing and what may happen if it doesn't do it properly.

Think of your digestive tract as a railway line with trains passing along regularly. If a train misses a scheduled stop, passengers cannot get on or off as they intended to do. Important meetings may be missed, friends and families bereft, deliveries unaccomplished. **Similarly, the journey food takes along your digestive tract does not contain any stages that can be skipped without detrimental effects!**

If food is not properly processed at each stage of the digestive system, the ensuing chaos of 'missing persons and lost packages' sends repercussions rippling throughout the body. We feel those repercussions, but may not link them to our digestive disorder, thinking that tiredness, cravings, itchy skin, weight gain and so on are just part of life's rich tapestry. Let me tell you now that any digestive difficulties you may have will impact negatively on your life and health, so safeguarding your digestive well-being is paramount to your happiness! **Pause and consider this, as you rush about your business with a sandwich in one hand and a takeaway coffee in the other...**



To start at the top

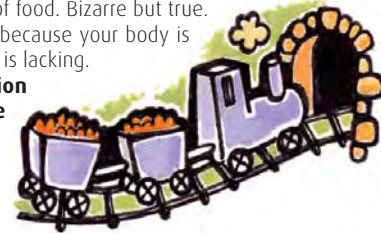
'Chew your food,' your granny said, as you bolted your meal with an eye on the clock. Listen to your granny! It is vitally important that food should be chewed in the mouth, commencing the process of digestion correctly. The act of chewing starts to break the food down. As the Chinese say, 'the stomach has no teeth': if your food isn't chewed in your mouth, it certainly won't be anywhere else.

Chewing also alerts the stomach to the imminent arrival of food, sending hormonal messengers that trigger the production of stomach acid and digestive enzymes.

Once in the stomach, food is worked on by the digestive juices, with protein chains being broken down into smaller pieces, and bugs that might have entered with the food being destroyed by the strong stomach acid.

The production of **digestive juices** in the stomach stimulates the rest of the digestive tract to produce digestive secretions. The stomach contents now enter the small intestine where they will be further broken down and the acidity neutralised by secretions from the intestinal wall. Most of the absorption of food constituents into the bloodstream takes place here. The pancreas secretes digestive enzymes and the liver produces bile, and between them they deal with the absorption of sugars, starches and fats. Why am I telling you all this? Because if the original chewing doesn't take place, or if you run around like a demented duck whilst eating, this won't happen! **You will then get partially digested foodstuffs fermenting and blowing you up like a balloon, causing gripping pain and inflammation, and generally creating havoc.** What's more, if your food isn't broken down and absorbed effectively, you won't get the nutrients you need from it, so you'll become malnourished despite eating plenty of food. Bizarre but true. In fact, you often get hunger pangs because your body is looking for sources of the nutrients it is lacking.

Sorting out your digestion can therefore reduce those troublesome cravings as well as removing stomach pains, indigestion, wind, bloating and abdominal cramps!



Moving On

The remains of the food are now pretty sloppy, having been broken down to a liquid consistency. They turn a corner at the right hand side of the lower abdomen, where the small intestine meets the large intestine, otherwise known as the colon or large bowel, and begin their journey up the ascending colon. Unless you spend part of your day hanging upside down, this part of the passage is working against gravity and can therefore be a tricky area; people often get pain up the right hand side of their abdomen where food residues have stuck.

The appendix is situated at this bend, secreting fluids that help ease the passage of the intestinal contents.

The main function of the colon is to absorb water and salts from the food residues. The longer the bowel contents hang around, the more water is absorbed and the harder and drier they become.

- Dry, compacted faeces are much harder for the bowel to grip and move along, so the bowel movements become slower and less effective. Thus, transit time (the time it takes your food to get from mouth to anus) increases and you're on your way to constipation. **The contents of the intestines are moved on by waves of muscular contraction called peristalsis, whereby the muscles contract to force foodstuffs along the passage, and then relax behind them.**
- Moreover, when the intestinal contents are moist and bulky, they fill the space inside the bowel and press on the bowel wall, sending a message to the brain that the bowels need to evacuate.
- Faeces that are not bulky are not only harder to move but are less effective at signalling that you should visit the loo. **Always go to the toilet when your body tells you to.** Waiting or trying to fight the urge will ultimately make your bowel weaker and leave you full of toxins.

A colleague once treated a businessman for horrible constipation by changing his diet and supplementing nutrients. Having experienced a non-constipated bowel for several days he decided to stop the treatment, as having to visit the loo a couple of times a day was interfering with his business timetable...

So why does it matter if wastes hang about a bit longer inside you?

Well let's just think about what happens if these waste products are left sitting in the colon. They dry out but they also fester. Just like rubbish left anywhere else, they breed germs and kick up a stink. The bowel wall is absorbent: water and vitamins are supposed to be absorbed through it into the bloodstream. Toxins, however, can also be absorbed, and will be if the bowel contents are stagnating. These toxins then travel in the bloodstream to the liver and ruin its day. This process is called **autointoxication** and basically means that toxins that should have left your body are being sent back to the liver, which has to deal with them again!

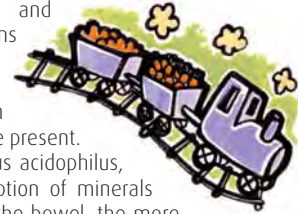
A dirty colon means dirty blood, which results in the rest of the body being flooded with toxins. You are effectively drowning in your own poisons... No wonder you feel irritated, lethargic and low. Sobering stuff. And there's more!

Unfriendly bacteria love to live on putrefying wastes in the colon, and once they have proliferated, they kill off friendly bacteria.

What's the big deal with friendly bacteria?

Friendly bacteria synthesise B vitamins and vitamin K in the colon. Some of these vitamins are absorbed through the colon into the bloodstream. Friendly bacteria also work on the food remains, breaking them down and destroying toxic chemicals that might be present. Some friendly bacteria, such as *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, produce lactic acid, which aids the absorption of minerals such as iron and calcium. The more acidic the bowel, the more pathogenic bacteria are destroyed and the happier the friendly bacteria are. The more alkaline the bowel, on the other hand, the more toxins are created, the fewer toxins are mopped up, and the more putrefaction takes place. This causes gas, bloating and general abdominal discomfort! Not good.

Remember the soft, bulky stool we were talking about, the one that is easily passed and has no trouble signalling for the bowel to move?



It also keeps the bowel wall clean, providing less of a breeding ground for unfriendly bacteria and therefore less autointoxication. You will be free of the cramping pains, foul wind and general discomfort that accompanies long transit times.

Think of the railway scenario – everyone knows how uncomfortable, hot, sticky and bad tempered you get when forced to sit for hours on a train that's going nowhere. Pity your poor bowel contents!



Wastes that sit around inside the colon for long periods of time can also stick to the gut wall, gradually hardening there. The gut wall becomes inflamed and you're back to the pain, cramping, bloating and all that jazz. When the gut wall becomes suitably inflamed and irritated, new food arrivals trigger diarrhoea. Many people's diarrhoea is caused by their long term constipation, little though they might suspect it.

What else can happen when your digestive tract is 'under-functioning'?

Flatulence arises from the bowel contents sitting stewing instead of moving on. It can also be caused by under-secretion of digestive enzymes, which leaves partially digested foodstuffs fermenting as they travel through the gut. Poor gallbladder function can be spotted by the faeces appearing as a chalky colour instead of brown.

Diverticulitis comes about when small, impacted faeces cause the muscles of the colon to push much harder in an attempt to grip the bowel contents. This intense pressure on the intestinal wall finally causes the muscles to sag, creating pockets that can fill with impacted faeces, creating inflammation and further weakening the tone of the gut wall. The weakened wall can bleed if impacted matter later breaks away.

What are we doing that causes the bowel to behave in this unpleasant way?

- Taking medicinal drugs may be one factor. Many drugs list constipation as a side effect and even iron supplements can sometimes have a constipating effect.

- A lack of magnesium makes the smooth muscle in the colon weaker. Magnesium may be missing from a junk food diet and can be stripped from the body by diuretics.
- Low vitamin C levels are also implicated in slow bowel movement, so supplementing vitamin C is always helpful.

How about what you eat?

Ah yes, this is very important.

- A high fat, high protein diet will feed the unfriendly bacteria nicely...
- They also love sugar and alcohol, cheese and bread.
- High levels of wheat in the diet may additionally lead to layers of gluten (wheat protein) sticking to the gut wall, providing a perfect breeding ground for putrefactive elements.
- **If you habitually consume vast quantities of coffee, tea, dairy products, wheat, chocolate and red meat, you will be much more likely to have bowel problems than someone eating heaps of fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, wholegrains and dried fruit.**
- Taking the skins off foods, making them whiter and easier to eat without chewing, does your bowel no favours.
- Fibre is very important: it soaks up liquid and bulks out the stool. If you are going to eat bread, make it brown and have it with salad or vegetables to help the gluten along.
- Choose brown rice, not white, sultanas instead of chocolate, and water instead of coffee or fizzy drinks.
- And that brings me to water. **A sufficient supply of water is particularly important for the bowel!** Without sufficient water the bowel contents soon dry up. The lining of the colon also changes, becoming thicker and stickier rather than providing a smooth lubricant for the passage of the faeces.

So there you are. If your digestive tract is not working well, you are likely to get pains, bloating, acid reflux, constipation, and a hefty dose of fatigue and craving for unhealthy foods, ruining all your diet plans.

Fortunately it is relatively easy to improve digestive function. Here we go....

Drink! Taking **1½ litres of water a day** is a cheap and effective way of improving health and raising energy levels. Try not to drink too much just before, during or after eating, as this will dilute the digestive juices. More than 20 minutes before or after eating is the best bet for effective drinking.

Avoid tobacco, coffee, sugar and alcohol, particularly if you are constipated, as they upset the gastric secretions and deaden the response of the bowel when used long term. Foods that will help include

- Short grain brown rice, cooked with lots of water and chewed well
- Figs, raw or cooked
- Dates, raw or cooked
- Carrot juice
- Prune juice

Whatever you eat, chew it well. Don't bolt it. If it hardly touches the sides as it goes down, the chances are the digestive system won't be ready for it and all sorts of mayhem will break out. Try chewing each mouthful 20 times for a while and surprise yourself with how much better your digestive tract feels.

Sit down and sit up... Yes yes, sounds silly; but what I mean is make sure you sit down to eat, rather than rushing to the shops in your lunch break with a snack in your hand, or jumping up all through dinner to fetch things for other people... Women are especially prone to doing this. So sit down, and make sure that you are sitting up with your shoulders back rather than slumped over your meal, as this makes it easier for the stomach walls to move and mix food up with the digestive enzymes.

Cramping up your stomach (which is situated under the ribcage) is a great way of causing indigestion. Once you've finished your meal, give yourself five minutes to start digesting, rather than rushing off at once. This again will make the digestive process more effective and less painful.



Exercise regularly, if only gently, as this stimulates muscle activity and assists peristalsis. Yoga is a good idea as it strengthens muscles and increases mobility without being beyond anyone's ability. To give your bowel more individual attention, **massage** gently in a clockwise circle around your belly, going up the right hand side and down the left, gently but firmly. Massaging in lavender oil, using a cream or oil base, is also helpful (and nice for the nose too).

Remedies

Lots of people ask me whether they should take tinctures (a liquid herbal extract) or tablets. If you have poor digestion then it really doesn't make sense to take anything that needs breaking down by the digestive system. In my clinic I use tinctures for all digestive problems, as well as finding liquid formats of any other supplements my clients may need. Once your digestion has improved you may consider moving on to tablets if you wish to.

Bitter herbs could be the best thing your gut ever experienced

A bitter taste on the tongue stimulates the production of digestive enzymes in the stomach, not to mention the correct balance of stomach acid (hydrochloric acid). If you are producing the right amount of stomach acid then you are more likely to break down your proteins properly and keep bugs such as *Helicobacter pylori* at bay. The production of stomach enzymes also triggers the rest of the digestive tract into action, so your liver and pancreas will wake up and take notice, meaning better absorption of food, less likelihood of food intolerances, and fewer cravings.

Extracts of bitter herbs such as **Centaurium** and **Yarrow** are therefore traditionally recommended for those suffering from acid reflux, acid indigestion and heartburn.



Bitters are known to work very quickly. They should be taken before each meal, although they may be taken afterwards if necessary. Take them until your digestion has been working



well for several weeks. You can return to them whenever necessary. If you have had a *Helicobacter pylori* infestation or have a hiatus hernia or bad acid reflux, you will need to take them for several months.

Look at getting more bitter foods and herbs into your diet if you suffer from **acid reflux, acid indigestion, heartburn, Helicobacter pylori, food intolerances** or **food cravings**.

Liver protection with bitter herbs

Herbs traditionally used for supporting the liver, such as **Dandelion** and **Artichoke**, are often bitter but they are additionally known to direct their activity towards the liver rather than the stomach. If you get general indigestion rather than reflux, feel full and uncomfortable in your abdomen after eating, and find that fatty, rich foods are productive of slight nausea, then liver-supporting herbs could be helpful to you.

Other signs that your liver may appreciate some attention could be skin problems, energy slumps, problems maintaining a healthy weight, poor memory and concentration, and an unpleasantly metallic taste in your mouth. Women may find their periods becoming heavy and painful. (These symptoms may not be related to digestion though, so check with your doctor if you're concerned.)

Dandelion is full of nutrients that are reported to support healthy liver function, particularly in the production and movement of bile, which helps break down fats. **Artichoke** has also been used traditionally to help the body break down fats, and for the maintenance of healthy cholesterol levels.

Bitter stomach herbs may be used for **upset stomach, general indigestion, abdominal pain, belching**, or **nausea especially after rich or fatty food**.

The herb most commonly associated with the liver is **Milk Thistle**. This is due to its ability to protect the liver from substances such as alcohol and medications, which might do it harm. It also improves the way that liver cells regenerate. Add Milk Thistle to your regime if you want to make amends for a period



of liver-challenging behaviour, or if you anticipate an interval of joyous 'retoxing'.

Don't slow down – herbs for constipation

One of the most effective ways you can address a whole raft of digestive problems is by getting the **bowel moving** regularly. By regularly I do actually mean on a daily basis, preferably even a twice-daily basis if you eat several meals per day.

Drinking sufficient water, reducing your intake of products made from white flour and/or white sugar, reducing your caffeine intake, increasing your fruit and veg intake, and chewing your food well may all help. If your bowels just need a tiny bit more encouragement then try adding a tsp of finely ground psyllium husks to a large glass of water very first thing in the morning, at least 20 minutes before breakfast. This is often all you need to get that extra offloading of wastes you don't want hanging about! (Try Lепicol powder, which is very easy to stir into water.)

If this doesn't do the trick, or if your bowel is definitely defiant in the face of all your efforts, use **herbal laxatives** such as combinations of **Linseed, Senna**, and **Rhamnus frangula**. These can be quite ruthless, so start with the lowest dose and see how your bowel responds. These aren't suitable for long-term use, but just for getting you off to a flying (or sitting...) start.



If you know that your bowel responds badly to emotional upheavals, e.g. binging up when in unfamiliar places, or exploding when you're nervous, then try **Bowel Essence**, which is a **flower remedy** that balances emotional states.

Tormented bowel? Dealing with diarrhoea

If your problem is a tendency to diarrhoea, not associated with constipation but maybe triggered by eating certain foods or experiencing a stressful situation, then **Tormentil** is a herb that is worth considering. It is associated with calming the nerves in the bowel and preventing them working overtime and whisking wastes through too fast. If you're worried about a possible bowel-orientated disaster, then this herb may be useful.

Be friendly to your good bacteria

To keep the friendly bacteria in your gut happy and thriving, **prebiotics** are a good choice. Indications that your gut bacteria are not powering along nicely are bloating, sugar cravings, attacks of thrush (oral or vaginal) or fungal skin rashes. These indicate that the friendly bacteria have been overpowered by unfriendly strains such as *Candida albicans*. Restoring an internal environment that is conducive to a friendly rather than unfriendly population of gut bacteria involves taking a prebiotic a couple of times daily, and avoiding obvious sources of refined sugar for a while.

If you have to take antibiotics at any time then take a course of prebiotics alongside them.

Bloating, craving sugar, bread, biscuits, cakes, etc., thrush, fungal skin rashes, *Helicobacter pylori* can be signs of imbalanced gut bacteria.

The benefits of a fully functional digestive system will make themselves felt in all areas of your life. You can have more energy, suffer less pain and bloating, feel invigorated instead of fatigued by your food, and find yourself less prone to mood swings and poor concentration. All that, just by doing some chewing and getting your bowel moving – start now and enjoy effortlessly efficient digestion for the rest of your life.

Herb	Traditional Use
Centaurium	Acidic symptoms
Yarrow	Acidic symptoms with lower digestive discomfort
Dandelion & Artichoke	Indigestion, fullness and flatulence
Milk Thistle	Liver protection
Linseed, Senna & Rhamnus frangula	Constipation
Tormentil	Diarrhoea



Warning: This book is intended for educational purposes and should not be used as a guide for the diagnosis and/or treatment of any disease. Health problems should be referred to a Healthcare Professional.

If you experience blood in your stools, pain with bowel movements, unexplained nausea or sudden and unexplained weight loss, sudden severe constipation or diarrhoea or a sharp pain in the lower right hand side of the abdomen, consult a Healthcare Professional immediately.





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Printed & published by
KennedySmith (Press) Ltd

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