

Ten-point tune-up, step 5: optimize your digestion

This article originally appeared on Dr. Teitelbaum's website, Vitality 101.

This is the next installment of my "Ten-Point Tune-Up" series, a ten-step approach to energizing your body, organ by organ, and system by system. This week, I'd like to discuss what is perhaps the most important system of all: your digestive system. Just consider a few of the wonders of your digestive tract:



- The thousands of taste buds on your tongue—each one a complex structure with a taste pore, "taste hairs," sensory cells and nerve fibers—are capable of generating more than 100,000 different flavors. (Mother Nature really wants you to enjoy your next meal!)
- Every day, your stomach pumps out a couple of quarts of hydrochloric acid, a liquid so powerful it can dissolve wood. (Take my word for it—don't eat any logs to test this out!)
- The liver—a digestive organ with many functions, from making protein to neutering toxins—can regenerate itself. Lose half your liver, and your body can replace the missing half in about two weeks (faster than a lot of us answer emails!).
- There are ten times more bacteria in your digestive tract than there are cells in your body (100 trillion vs. 10 trillion). A little later, I'll explain what they're doing there.
- Your digestive tract also contains 70% of your immune system. Scientists call it your gut-associated lymphoid system, or GALT. I call it one more good reason to pay attention to digestive health.
- There are so many brain-influencing chemicals hanging out in your digestive tract that experts have dubbed it the "second brain." It's no surprise that we have gut feelings!

When your digestive system is purring, you usually feel great. When it's not, you feel lousy: bloated, queasy, cramped, gassy, in pain, and plagued by food sensitivities. Like the pain of heartburn that afflicts 120 million Americans, who spend \$14 billion a year on acid-suppressing drugs. Or irritable bowel syndrome, which affects 60 million Americans, two-thirds of them woman. Or more than 50% of Americans over 50 who have hemorrhoids.

Good digestion should be as natural as eating. Why is bad digestion so common?

To conventional doctors, including most gastroenterologists, the underlying cause of most digestive ills remains a mystery. That's why medicine's so-called cures are usually nothing more than a pill to quiet symptoms or surgery to remove the offending organ. But there are four key blocks to optimal digestion—and natural, easy methods to remove those blocks, optimize digestion, and feel great.

Time to tune-up your digestive tract!

Replace the Missing Enzymes

Mention “enzymes” to a conventional digestive expert, and he’ll probably talk about the digestive enzymes your body manufactures, like the *amylase* from salivary glands that digests carbohydrate, or the *pepsin* from that stomach that digests protein. But there’s a critical fact about digestive enzymes that doctors aren’t taught: they play second fiddle in the digestive symphony to the enzymes in *food*. Yes, the most important enzymes are those normally found in food, like the enzymes that ripen an apple or a tomato.

Sadly, food manufacturers learned long ago that removing the enzymes lengthens shelf life (and increases profitability). So that’s just what they did, using chemicals, gassing, and other processing techniques to strip out the natural enzymes. The upside: the food doesn’t rot on the shelf. The downside: the food becomes hard to digest, causing indigestion.

The solution to this problem: At larger meals, take a nutritional supplement containing plant-based digestive enzymes. (Enzymes from animal sources don’t work well in the acid environment of the stomach.) Long-term use of these supplements can dramatically improve your health and well-being. I recommend **CompleteGest®** (from Enzymatic Therapy). Take two capsules with each meal as needed to help digest food properly.

Pass the Acid Test

Heartburn is incredibly common, with millions of people taking powerful heartburn drugs like Nexium, Prevacid and Prilosec. Studies show that when used for more than a few months, these proton-pump inhibitors can erode bones, weaken the immune system, steal vital nutrients—and even increase your risk of dying from a heart attack! There are more benign drugs and natural alternatives that work just as well. Unfortunately, acid blocker meds are quite addictive, causing rebound acid hypersecretion when stopped—even in those who never had indigestion before the medication! This translates to “Heartburn from Hell” if you stop it suddenly.

So here’s how to wean off the acid blockers comfortably:

1. Improve your digestion by taking the **CompleteGest** enzymes with meals (see above).
2. Drink sips of warm liquids instead of cold while eating (cold temperatures inhibit digestive enzyme function). An exception? Refrigerator cold (not *ice* cold) diet colas (like Zevia cola) supply acid that can help you digest your food.
3. Avoid coffee, aspirin/ibuprofen products, and alcohol until your stomach heals and then use them in limited amounts.
4. Take measures to heal up your stomach lining. Using DGL licorice (must be the DGL form as others can cause blood pressure problems) can be powerfully effective in resolving your symptoms. Research shows that it is as effective as tagamet, but is healthy for you! **Advanced DGL caps** (by EuroPharma) or **DGL Ultra Chocolate Chews** (by Enzymatic Therapy) are easy ways to get the DGL licorice. As they help to heal the stomach instead of just masking symptoms, they may take 3-6 weeks to work. I would continue your acid blocker for the first 4 weeks during that time.
5. In many patients, stomach infections (H. Pylori) can be a major cause of long-term indigestion. Most doctors treat this with Prilosec for 10-14 days combined

with 2-3 antibiotics used simultaneously. Another approach is to add Limonene (**Advanced Heartburn Rescue** by EuroPharma) once your indigestion has settled down a bit with the licorice/mastic gum, as this can kill the infection.

6. Use **Immediate Heartburn Relief** (by EuroPharma) as a chewable antacid when needed. Over-the-counter antacids with alkalinizing minerals (calcium combined with magnesium) also work to squelch heartburn when it acts up. Immediate Heartburn Relief has a mix of calcium, magnesium, vitamin D and vitamin K, making it very effective and also heart healthy. Unfortunately, plain calcium, like Tums, may increase heart attack risk with chronic use. So when convenient, switch to Immediate Heartburn Relief.

How Can I Come Off My Prescription Antacids?

After doing this treatment regimen for 1-2 months and you are feeling better, ask your doctor if you can stop your prescription antacids and switch to over the counter Tagamet (cimetidine) 400 mg 2-3x day, and stay on the DGL licorice and CompleteGest. The Tagamet will decrease your stomach acid instead of totally turning it off. By doing this, your body can slowly ease back to normal production of acid. Decrease the dose of Tagamet by 200 mg a day each 1-2 weeks. After you have weaned off the Tagamet for 2-3 weeks, you can change the DGL licorice to taking it as needed. If symptoms recur down the line, simply take the Immediate Heartburn Relief antacid whenever you get indigestion, and if persistent, resume the DGL licorice for a few weeks. Stay on the CompleteGest long term. Meanwhile, you'll have broken your addiction to antacids and allowed your body to have the stomach acid it needs for proper digestion—and optimal health!

A Final Note on Helping Your Colon

Your digestive tract (particularly your colon, the final section) is filled with so-called “friendly” bacteria, or probiotics. But friendly is an understatement—they're downright generous! These good-guy germs help keep bad bacteria and disease-causing fungi under control; neutralize toxins; keep you regular; play a role in the manufacture of vitamins, essential fatty acids, and amino acids; and regulate hormones and cholesterol. Not bad for a bug! Here's how to make sure those friendly bacteria crowd out any bad bacteria in your gut:

- Eat more fruits, vegetables and fiber-rich whole grains—and less processed foods. Studies show that people who eat a lot of whole foods have more good bacteria. Another food that's great for your insides is acidophilus-rich yogurt. Eat a cup a day, and make sure it's sugar-free. (Personally, I've found that some of the sugar-free Greek yogurts are amazingly delicious. I just add some stevia and fresh fruit.)
- Take a probiotic supplement. These supplements contain the friendly and health-giving bacteria that should inhabit your gut. All probiotic supplements are not created equal, however, and I won't use most of them. Why? Because unless they have a special enteric coating to protect the healthy bacteria, your stomach acid will kill 99+% of most probiotic bacteria. So I recommend brands with the enteric coatings.