

INTESTINAL HEALTH

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The gastrointestinal tract is routinely defined as “a tube approximately 15 feet long, running through the body from mouth to anus.” The World Book Dictionary adds that the intestine is “the lower part of the alimentary canal...where food from the stomach passes into the intestine for further digestion and for absorption.” This boring, simplistic concept of intestinal function, combined with its indisputable lack of glamour, is reason enough for most people to never give the importance of intestinal health a second thought. This is unfortunate, and possibly even dangerous. The reality is that healthy intestinal function is critically important to overall health.

The Intestine as a Protective Barrier

Consider as an analogy the atmosphere surrounding the earth and its role in protecting our environment. It parallels the function of the intestine and its role in protecting our overall health. The earth's atmosphere provides a protective barrier to support and sustain an abundant variety of life. But it is important to note that balance is the key! The atmosphere is composed of a critical balance of different gases that enable it to provide the earth with important filter-like protection to support the life of its 30 million different species of inhabitants.

In principle, the intestine provides a very similar protective barrier. The intestinal wall is coated with hundreds of different species of microorganisms, both healthy and unhealthy bacteria, numbering in the billions. This rich, protective coating of microorganisms acts in concert with the physical barrier provided by the cells lining the intestinal tract and other factors to provide the body with important filter-like protection. Damaging substances like unhealthy bacteria, toxins, chemicals and wastes are filtered out and eliminated. Simultaneously, the critical factors needed for life, such as nutrients and water, are absorbed into circulation and made available to the billions of cells in the body that need them.

Just as the atmosphere selectively filters out excessive amounts of ultraviolet radiation to protect life on earth, the selective barrier function of the intestine is equally protective. In the healthy state, small sugars, fats and proteins are absorbed through the intestinal wall and circulate throughout the body. They are required for a myriad of essential reactions. At the same time, damaging substances from unhealthy bacteria, incompletely digested food, toxins or chemicals are largely prevented from being absorbed and transported throughout the body.

Bad Habits That Negatively Impact Intestinal Health

Unfortunately, human beings have developed bad habits that promote imbalance in both the atmosphere and the intestinal tract. For example, pollutants such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) have punctured holes in our ozone shield. The ozone hole has widened and deepened every year since scientists began

measuring ozone levels in 1985. Scientists feel that the continued depletion of the ozone layer will cause increasing amounts of ultraviolet radiation to reach earth, resulting in greater cancer risks, as well as other health problems.

In a remarkable parallel, other bad habits in our society in general have contributed to an imbalance of intestinal protective factors in an alarming percentage of the population. These bad habits include widespread consumption of a diet high in fat and refined simple sugars and deficient in nutritious, whole, unprocessed foods and fiber. This type of diet could potentially tip the intestinal balance toward the overgrowth of unhealthy bacteria and the proliferation of yeast or fungal organisms. It is also associated with less frequent bowel movements and a number of forms of chronic intestinal dysfunction. Other bad habits include excess consumption of alcohol and the use of antacids and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory pain relievers, such as aspirin and ibuprofen. These may contribute to a breakdown or deterioration in the physical integrity of the intestinal wall, much like CFCs create holes in the ozone layer.

Scientists describe this state of intestinal breakdown as “leaky gut syndrome” and feel it may contribute to intestinal dysfunction. A high-stress lifestyle combined with a poor diet deficient in important nutrients, such as L-glutamine, pantothenic acid, zinc, folic acid, vitamin B₁₂, vitamin A and others, may impair the healing of intestinal deterioration. Another bad habit is the overuse of broad spectrum antibiotics. Some researchers have acknowledged that virtually every antibiotic taken orally causes alterations in the balance of the bacteria in the intestine. As little as one course of antibiotics may impair the rich, protective coating of microorganisms and upset the balance between healthy and unhealthy bacteria, reducing the resistance to intestinal and systemic ill health.

Suggestions for Achieving Optimal Intestinal Health

To achieve optimal intestinal health, the following suggestions may be helpful. Avoid excessive alcohol use and refined, sugar-rich, fiber-poor foods. Avoid the use of antacids and broad spectrum antibiotics whenever possible. Eat a diet rich in whole, unprocessed, nutritious foods and fiber. Drink plenty of pure water. Supplement the diet with high quality, probiotic (beneficial) bacteria such as lactobacilli and bifidobacteria to support a healthful and balanced population of intestinal bacteria. Preparations utilizing pure, strain-identified probiotics—such as *Lactobacillus acidophilus* NCFM® strain and *Bifidobacterium lactis* BI-07 strain—are considered to be highly effective. Consider adding fructooligosaccharides (FOS), which act as a food source to nourish and promote the growth of certain beneficial bacteria, along with glutamine, phosphatidylcholine, and licorice to nourish and protect the intestinal lining. Lastly, specific proteins from whey, such as lactoferrin and immunoglobulins (antibodies), along with the fiber arabinogalactan provide additional protection from harmful microorganisms in the intestines and promote intestinal immune resistance.