herbs for the digestive system
(from one end to the other...)
...presented by herbalist jim mcdonald

Digestion provides the initial foundation for the larger process of metabolism, which also includes utilization of the nutrition digested, as well as the elimination of metabolic wastes. It is also a process with which most people have experienced a wide array of troubles. Everyone, by adulthood, has thrown up, been constipated, had diarrhea, or gas, or heartburn. These are common problems, and because of their familiarity, they are the ones most people look to take care of themselves... the top sellers in over the counter medications are primarily digestive remedies, and the same can be said for herbal preparations.

What most people aren’t as familiar with is how to look differentially at their digestive issues. This is important, because although there are numerous brands and forms of herbal and OTC medications, there is rarely a one size fits all solution to any digestive dilemma. So, here we'll look into this differentiation, and explore the many different ways once can be constipated, and how to decide, in the throws of nausea, whether you'd be better off with Ginger or Catnip. What, pray tell, could be more enlightening than that?

the gastro-intestinal tract

In essence, digestion is a multiple step extraction and absorption process; first, the food we consume is broken down by the means of mechanical processes (chewing, the grinding of the stomach) and acted on by a variety of solvents (saliva, acid, bile and enzymes). Each of these steps ensures that when the food begins its travels through the intestines, it is broken down to a suitable state for absorption to be optimal.

The GI tract can be broken up into two parts, aptly named (so long as one is standing upright) the upper GI and lower. I say aptly, but do need to point out the insipidity (silliness) of these terms: there are, after all, no “Intestines” in the upper “GI” and no “Gastric” in the lower “GI”.

But, as these are readily understood terms and I don’t know of any others that express the concept well, we’ll stick with them. In general, the Upper GI is involved in breakdown and extraction, and the lower GI in absorption. There is, though, a bit of overlap, as the stomach (certainly upper GI) does absorb some things and the duodenum, in the small intestine, is still breaking down food and extracting nutrients. So, initially, it makes sense to briefly discuss the organs of the digestive tract and what they do. Of course, these are only thumbnail sketches of a brilliant and elaborate process...

structures and functions

mouth/teeth/gums/salivary glands

These probably don’t need much in the way of description. The mouth, as a whole, mechanically breaks up food into smaller pieces, as well as beginning the process of digestion as the enzymes in saliva begin the breakdown of starches and lingual lipase does the same with triglycerides. While we probably all know this, it is often overlooked how important this first step of digestion is: it sets the stage for all subsequent digestive processes. In short, we need to chew our food well, and a large percentage of us don’t. Probably a large percentage of those who don’t think they do. I don’t think we need to literally count how many times we chew, but we should be aware that our food is well chewed before we swallow. By eating
consciously, by paying attention to eating as we’re doing it, we can ensure that the food is broken down so that there’s lots of surface area for all the rest of our digestive secretions to work on. Michigan herbalist Joyce Wardwell makes note of the old diet fad of “fletcherizing”, which simply revolved around the wisdom of *chewing our food well*. It’d be nice to see this simple wisdom resurface.

**tonsils**

At the back of your throat are the tonsils. They aren’t the little thing that hangs down (that’s the uvula, which has an effect on speech and breath direction), but the lymphatic glands on either side of it. These aren’t digestive glands, but immune tissues that guard the one of the entrances to the body: the mouth.

**esophagus**

Once food is swallowed, it travels down the esophagus by peristaltis; waves on muscle contractions that send the food to the stomach. At the bottom of the esophagus is the lower esophageal or cardiac sphincter, which separates the caustic stomach secretions from the esophageal tissues. Ideally, it functions as a one way entrance, though when it loses tone stomach acid can escape and injure esophageal tissues.

**stomach**

The stomach, like the mouth, both mechanically grinds food (now called “chyme”) and acts on it by way of various solvents that make up the gastric juice. These include acids, enzymes and hormones, and collectively they help break down proteins, carbohydrates, and prepare nutrients for further breakdown by subsequent digestive secretions. The stomach’s tissues are protected from these rather intense solvents by a thick layer of mucous.

The stomach also does absorb some things, notably alcohol & aspirin (which would include the myriad plant based salicins found in some foods and herbs), though to a lesser degree water, electrolytes, some fatty acids and other nutrients are absorbed there as well (the role of the stomach in absorption of some of these is still being unraveled and debated).

**small intestine**

The small intestine is the primary organ of absorption. It is made up of three parts (in descending order): the duodenum (about 10 inches), the jejunum (about three feet), and the ileum (around 6 feet). In the duodenum, in which the brunt of absorption occurs, the chyme is exposed to bile made by the liver and secreted by the gall bladder, and enzymes secreted by the pancreas. The bile emulsifies the lipids/fats/oils, and the pancreatic secretions aid in their breakdown, in addition to helping digest carbs, proteins, and other nutrients. These secretions also provide lubrication in the small intestine, and in so doing help prevent constipation resultant from dry tissues. The small intestine secretes mucous that further helps lubricate its tissues, and helps to bind the chyme together. All its tissues are covered with villi, fingerlike projections that increase the surface area, which allows for optimal absorption. It is estimated that there is somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 square feet of surface area in the small intestine. The small intestine is lined with blood vessels and lymphatic tissue, which take up nutrients and keep watch for microbial invaders attempting to enter the body. In addition to our own tissues and organ, the small intestine is populated by literally trillions of bacteria, primarily inhabiting the latter end of it. These microbial residents are absolutely necessary for optimal digestion.
The liver's workings in the body are immense, and far beyond my means to elucidate here. While its role in the greater metabolism is extensive, in the process of digestion the most pertinent liver process is the creation of bile to facilitate the breakdown of lipids for digestion. Bile is created by the liver, shunted off into the gall bladder for safe keeping (bile can be produced, but not housed, in the liver lest damage occur), and then triggered to be released as the contents of the stomach are released into the duodenum. Bile also provides lubrication for the chyle as it passes through the intestines.

Like the liver, the pancreas performs a number of functions in the body at large, but in regards to the process of digestion, we can simplify things by saying that it creates a number of enzymes that help the body digest the fat as it is being emulsified by the bile.

The appendix lies in the cecum, between the small and large intestines. Until recently, it was considered a “useless” organ, but it is rich in lymphatic tissue and now it is speculated that the appendix in a sense “houses” or “cultivates” friendly bacteria for the large intestine. If the colon is purged of these beneficial bacteria as a result of diarrhea or some other illness, the reserves housed in the appendix can quickly repopulate the colon.

The large intestine, or colon, is composed of four sections: the ascending colon, the transverse colon, the descending colon and the sigmoid colon, which includes the rectum. In its entirety, the colon travels from the right hip area upwards, across and below the diaphragm, downward towards the left hip, and then squiggling back to the anus. Unlike the small intestine, it contains no villi, only pores with which it absorbs mostly water, but also some vitamins, minerals and electrolytes. The rectum has thick, strong muscles that allow us to “hold it” till we choose to defecate.

Throughout, the digestive tract is lined with mucous membranes. While we commonly think of the digestive tract as being internal (after all, it is inside of us), these tissues are actually external surfaces, in the same way that hole that goes through a donut is not the inside of the donut). And in many ways, the mucous membranes are most similar to skin, excepting its ability to secrete mucous.

Mucous itself is an amazingly virtuous substance. Too often now, people wrongly consider mucous a sign of illness. But herbalist Paul Bergner has shared with me that in fact, mucous is one of the body's most precious immune fluids, acting as a lubricant to protect tissues from damage and provide moisture, and as an immune defense, proving a barrier with which to protect tissues and trap pathogens (in fact, the only other fluid produced by the body is a mother's breastmilk).
the enteric nervous system
It is seldom discussed that the intestinal tract is lined throughout with nerve tissue. This tissue helps regulate the enteric nervous system, which is that part of the autonomic ("not under conscious control") nervous system that regulates the process of digestion. But the enteric nervous system is far more complex than that. In fact, the nerve tissue in the digestive tract produces the majority of the neurotransmitters, endorphins and other factors associated with mood. Herbalists have long noted that good digestion has impacts far beyond the uptake of nutrients, and in virtually all herbal traditions, herbs that improved digestion were also known to impact mood and disposition (bitters being an example). Fascinating as this is, we have only time to discuss it briefly.

organ associations
In most holistic medicine traditions, the body’s organs and systems aren’t just parts of functional machine, but both house and express certain traits or attributes. Here’s a brief rundown of the basic associations:

stomach: The stomach is believed to house instinct; “gut” reactions. A weak stomach may correlate with weakened instinctual powers, or weakened trust in them.

small intestine: The small intestine represents the quality of assimilation, of taking what is needed from something and putting it to use.

liver: The liver, in a positive state, represents faith. Imbalanced, though, the liver holds our angers and frustrations.

gall bladder: The personal ego is said to be housed in the gall bladder. This doesn’t necessarily mean ego as in “what a big ego” (though in an imbalanced state it can), but rather a sense of one’s personal self, of confidence and self assuredness.

large intestine/colon
The colon can be associated with one’s ability (or inability) to “let go” of things, or, as Matthew Wood points out, it can represent self-governance.

While these energetic/metaphoric associations are fascinating and can sometimes shed light on the deeper issues at play in an illness, it should also be kept in mind that, for example, simplifying someone’s Hepatitis down to “what are you really angry about?” is both naive and disrespectful. These types of associations aren’t meant to be understood in the A=B sense, but rather to ponder with an open mind to see what insights they might yield. Maybe you’ll get an “Aha!” or maybe there isn’t one there to get. What’s important is broadening the number of perspectives you look at an issue from, a practice that generally offers one greater perspective.

using herbs; understanding actions
The actions of herbs on the GI tract are distinct in that there is direct contact between the herbs and the tissues they are affecting. This makes understanding the properties by which herbs work very important. While you can certainly choose herbs by looking up a problem in a
book or online and then selecting from among the herbs mentioned as being useful to resolve that problem, digging deeper into the practice of herbalism and seeking to understand why certain herbs are indicated for a particular malady offers far more potential to heal than using an herb because its "good for constipation".

**Alterative**
Alterative herbs are hard to define; the word came about because the old herbalists would say that they “altered the body in some unknown way that favored health”. How’s that for vague. They’ve also been called “blood cleansers” or “blood purifiers”, and “detoxifiers”, but they don’t actually act on the blood itself, so these notions can be misleading. I consider alteratives "metabolic tonics". What this means is that these herbs get the body’s metabolic functions "in sync", or "in tune"; all of the organs and systems of the body are functioning as a cohesive whole, which creates biological energy efficiency. When we're running in an efficient, balanced state, we generally have all the energy we need to deal with dis-ease. If stress, a poor diet, lack of sleep or exercise, or any number of disrupting forces throw our metabolism out of balance, we create ripe soil in which illness may manifest.

It is important to understand that alteratives act by feeding and nourishing the body - by supporting it - rather than by forcing it to behave in one manner or another. Therefore, these herbs are more akin to nourishing foods than medicines (in fact, most, such as Burdock, Nettle and Dandelion, are foods). Long term, regular use will provide maximum benefits... sporadic, inconsistent use is unlikely to yield their full potential. By viewing alterative herbs as foods and incorporating them into our "diet" as a daily source of nourishment, we may maintain our "systemic harmony" or "balance", and create a biological environment that more efficient and so less susceptible to be thrown or remain imbalanced.

Alteratives all act on many systems to promote such balance, and additionally, many have an affinity to particular systems. Burdock is probably one of the most broadly applicable, acting to balance and restore the functioning of the digestive and metabolic functions without acting overly strong on any individually. Dandelion, Yellow Dock and Oregon Graoe roots both have a special affinity for sluggish states of the liver and lower GI tract, while Dandelion leaves acts more diuretically. Stinging Nettle also acts as a general metabolic tonic, with emphasis on addressing depleted states of the kidneys and adrenals. Cleavers is a gentle tonic to the liver and kidneys and helps prevent congestion of the lymphatics.

**Aromatic**
Aromatic herbs are those with a strong fragrant scent; think about pretty much any kitchen spice. By nature they tend to be antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and dispersive (dispersive of gas, dispersive of tension, dispersive of stagnant mucous) to congested states. Anise, Fennel, Caraway, Cardamom, Calamus, Angelica, Chamomile, Catnip, Mints, Lemon Balm, Wild Bergamot and Thyme are all aromatics.

**Astringent**
Astringent herbs tone and tighten tissues. They are used when tissues are weakened or lax, or when “leaking”... they don’t have the strength to hold in (or pull in) their fluids. Think about the drying, tightening sensation of eating a too green banana, or the subtler experience offered by tea, or a strawberry. Astringents with a special affinity for the digestive tract include
Strawberry leaf, Blackberry, Raspberry, Wild Geranium, Staghorn Sumach, Avens, Purple Loosestrife and Oak Bark.

**bitter**

Bitter herbs stimulate the secretion of digestive acids, juices and enzymes, which generally improve appetite & sluggish digestion, especially of fats/oils/lipids. You must taste bitters to receive their medicinal virtues. Dandelion, Goldenseal, Barberry, Oregon Grape Root, Yellow Dock, Gentian, Turtlehead and Hops are all bitters.

**carmenitive**

Carminatives are aromatic herbs that contain volatile oils and initiate the expulsion of intestinal gas. They often relieve cramping as well. All the aromatic herbs listed above are also carminatives.

**demulcent/mucilage**

A mucilage is a carbohydrate contained in a number of plants, that when exposed to water yields a slippery, viscid, sort of gooey liquid. Mucilages coat, soothe and moistens dry, irritated and inflamed tissues. Taken internally, mucilaginous herbs are considered “demulcents”. Slippery Elm and Marshmallow root are almost exclusively demulcent, while Violet leaves, Sassafras leaves, Plantain, Comfrey, and Flax Seed are a bit less so.

**relaxant**

These herbs help relax constricted tissues and ease spasms; they are common called antispasmodics. They may or may not have a relaxant activity on the nervous system. Wild Yam, Cramp Bark, Lobelia, Catnip, Chamomile, Hops and Valerian are good digestive relaxants.

**tissue healers**

Some herbs, such as Plantain, Calendula, Evening Primrose and Comfrey, have a special affinity for healing and strengthening tissues. While I think the issue is too complex to entirely write off the use of Comfrey, because there are concerns about the toxicity of the pyrolizidine alkaloids it contains I have limited my recommendations regarding its use here. There is extensive info on the varying points of view on the safety of comfrey in the article index on my website: www.herbcraft.org/articleindex.html.

**trophorestorative**

Trophorestoratives are herbs that help to strengthen the stricture of an organ, and also restore proper function. These are the kinds of herbs people think of when they hear the term "tonic". Goldenseal is an incredible trophorestorative to the mucous membranes.

There are numerous other properties by which herbs act, but these are the foundational ones upon which most other actions are based.

Also, there are some more generalized, but foundationally important concepts worthy of consideration, which is the assessment of the qualities hot, cold, damp, dry, constricted and/or lax. These are often applied to both conditions and herbs, and generally, a cold condition (let’s say sluggish metabolism) is given warming herbs (for example ginger). A hot condition (enflamed mucous membranes in the stomach) is given cooling herbs (peach leaf). Dry conditions would be “moistened” by herbs containing mucilage or fixed oils, damp conditions
“dried” by astringents. Yes, the practice is a strange blend of simple and confusing, but you get the general idea, I hope.

**addressing common problems and imbalances**

It goes without saying that a healthy diet and proper nutrition are of paramount importance in ensuring digestive wellness. Though its possible to do, we should not use herbs to pacify problems with dietary or nutritional causes, as this can allow the root cause of a problem to persist while we suppress the symptoms our body is using to call our attention to itself. For practicalities sake, though, I will not be spending time discussing diet, since that would allow us little if any time to talk about herbs. I would though, like to state this:

**There is no one diet everyone should follow.**

Yes, that seems simple, and yes certainly you can make a solid case for a diet of all natural foods, or something similar. But when we get into more specialized diets, whether macrobiotic, raw, vegetarian or vegan, paleolithic, “Nourishing Traditions”, the blood type diet or whatever, I would like to say that any diet that doesn’t allow for *wide* variances cannot apply to broad groups of diverse people. I know, I know… everyone has heard that they shouldn’t eat meat, or they should, or that cooking food kills it, or that not cooking food hinders digestion. My opinion is that so long as we’re choosing healthy food for ourselves, the more widely varied a diet is, the broader the range of nutrients we take in.

If you’re following a restrictive diet that is causing you a lot of stress, I’d suggest that you think long and hard about continuing it. While there are certainly situations where stress creating diets can’t be helped (bonafide allergies to dairy or wheat can pose a number of challenges, for example), lots of people fall into overly stressful diets in the search for health, even though the stress of living within the rules of the diet might significantly predispose one to feeling lousy. Feeling lousy isn’t good for you, and it can negate any of the benefits claimed for a particular diet. Some have made a case for an eating disorder called “orthorexia nervosa”, which is an unhealthy fixation on healthy eating.

Although I certainly prefer that people get their nutrition from food as opposed to supplements, I do recognize that if a person, for whatever reason, is going to have a hard time getting enough of a certain nutrient or nutrients dietarily, its better to take supplements than allow nutritional deficiencies to persist. Most people, if not virtually everyone, will benefit from added magnesium, vitamin d (especially in northern latitudes in the winter), and Omega 3 Essential Fatty Acids.

Herbs fill a special role in digestive wellness. Many of them cannot be defined as either food or medicine – they’re both. Others have been incorporated into food as spices, while in reality they’re not only adding their flavor and aroma, but their medicinal virtues to whatever foods they’re added to. More overtly medicinal herbs often act by correcting imbalances or restoring proper function as opposed to suppressing symptoms. While there are certainly very strong herbs, and herbs with potential to cause adverse reactions, these need seldom be used for most common digestive woes.

As I discuss various conditions and complaints below, I’ll make reference a number of specific herbs. Please, though, keep in mind that there are nearly infinite substitutions, alterations,
refinements and personalizations that can be made to any given recommendation. If an interesting recipe calls for the Wild Geranium as an astringent, and you don’t seem to have any, you can usually substitute another astringent (such as blackberry or raspberry root) in place of it. This is a part of why I stressed the importance of understanding properties.

So, off we go…

.. UPPER GI:

afflictions of the mouth
First things first: remember chewing. You need to chew your food well to break it down adequately, lest all your other organs have to do a bunch of extra work and expend more energy than they should have to.

teeth: Matthew Wood has stated that Oak Bark tea or tincture as a mouth rinse is one of the best preservers of teeth.

saliva: If you need to increase the flow of saliva, Prickly Ash (especially the southern species of Prickly Ash, Xanthoxylum clava-herculis) will do it. Though I haven’t used it, Spilanthes is also said to excel in this area. Echinacea or Kava will also do (all these give you mouth the “tinglies”). Likewise, most bitter herbs will stimulate the production of saliva (and most other digestive juices), so long as they are tasted. Bitters would be more appropriate if inadequate secretion and sluggishness seems to exist throughout the GI tract.

weak, spongy or bleeding gums: This condition clearly calls for astringents, which restore tone to tissues. Wild Geranium, Oak Bark, and myriad other astringent tinctures or teas can be used as a rinse. Because gum disease can be associated with loss of teeth and other serious conditions, it shouldn’t be overlooked.

bad breath: While bad breath may certainly be a local phenomenon, and readily cured by the chewing or gargling of whatever aromatic breath freshener floats your boat, foul emanations from one’s mouth often result from deeper gut issues. Fresh Parsley is often served at restaurants to address this concern (yup – that sprig is not merely ornamental), but bitter herbs often work wonders here. Although The FDA has in my mind wrongly condemned it as unsafe, I find chewing on the bitter, aromatic Calamus root works wonders. Ypsilanti herbalist Heidi Knab told me a few years ago that the bitter flowers of the invasive Spotted Knapweed are also exceptional in this regard, and experience has likewise affirmed this. Just about any bitter will do, though if you can help it, choose one you like.

sores: Cold sores, canker sores and other variations of stomatitis are very unpleasant. they can be both stubborn to heal and painful. Treatment requires a blend of astringents (sores are damp and puffy by nature, and astringents dry and tighten tissues) and antimicrobials. Most any decided astringent will do, but Wild Geranium, Oak Bark, & Staghorn Sumach Bark come to mind. Sour juices are also on the astringent spectrum and can be helpful. As for antimicrobials, most of the yellow rooted berberine containing plants (Goldenseal, Barberry, Goldthread, Oregon Grape Root) are quite effective, as is Myrrh… all of these, by the way, taste pretty awful. To address viral causes, Lemon Balm is known to be active against herpes
viruses when used topically, and is tasty enough to make up for the others. Propolis, a resin produced by bees, is also a potent antiviral.

**stomach stressors**

One thing to be aware of is that many people don’t really mean their stomach when they say their stomach… the commonplace saying “stomach ache” sums up this point pretty well, as it usually refers to intestinal distress.

**Dyspepsia (or “indigestion”):** Dyspepsia, or as its more commonly called now “indigestion”, refers to the collection of upper GI symptoms like belching, cramping, bloating, heartburn and nausea that sometimes follows meals. Most of us will have indigestion many times, and it’s generally a bummer while it’s happening, but resolves completely. Still, it needn’t be suffered, when there are many herbs that can ease its discomfort. Bitter herbs before meals can be helpful, but they can be used after the facts as well. Aromatic herbs like Chamomile, Anise or Fennel can also help immensely. For specific symptoms, see the recommendations below.

**Belching:** Belching, when it’s a problem and not just a practical reality of life, is primarily the result of the swallowing or gulping of air, often from too quick eating. Some of the air swallowed will get passed along to the lower GI, and eventually escape from that direction. Fixing this goes along with slowing down, chewing your food well, and being more relaxed and present while eating. Bitters may be helpful.

**Cramps:** Cramping is familiar enough to us all so as not to require much of a description. The relaxants Wild Yam and Cramp Bark excel in the easing of cramps and spasm, and the presence of constriction or tension. Cramp bark is very broad in its action, lowering tension throughout the frame a notch or two. Wild Yam is equally effective, but perhaps more pronounced in its effect. It can more rapidly help more severe cramping, especially when it hits you in waves. Many aromatic herbs (Mints, Chamomile, Angelica, Ginger…) also ease cramping.

**Heartburn & Acid Reflux:** When acid escapes from the stomach via the lower esophageal sphincter (which is suppose to only let thing into the stomach, the caustic secretions irritate and eventually damage the esophageal tissues. This can range from an occasional unpleasant but transient experience to a more severe and debilitating degenerative condition. Conventional medicine approaches the condition primarily by using antacids or medicines that inhibit the production of acid. This is a very poor approach, methinks. This condition is not always or even often associated with excess acid production. In fact, it’s a common symptom of deficient acid production. So, to inhibit acid production even more is a bad idea, is it will cause problems in digestion, especially of minerals. We should be focusing more on why the lower esophageal sphincter isn’t able to form a tight seal. This would seem to indicate a lack of tissue strength or tone, which would indicate the use of astringents. Bitter herbs (Artichoke Leaf, Turtlehead, Gentian) also should be considered, as they encourage secretion and “downward” elimination. Bitters also help to increase stomach acid, which often helps rather than aggravates reflux. Most aromatic herbs, which are dispersive and tend to have an “upward” energy would be contraindicated, but I’ve generally seen great results with Peach Leaf tincture, and both Fennel and Chamomile can certainly be helpful. Best to avoid Mints, though. Because we want to both address the foundational causes of reflux and still be able to
ease the discomfort caused by it, it can be appropriate to use antacid herbs, so long as we’re at the same time helping to heal the underlying imbalance. Mucilaginous herbs are excellent choices to counteract acid, as they also coat, soothe and heal the irritated or injured tissues. Slippery Elm and Marshmallow excel here, though some mucilaginous herbs are also astringent, such as Purple Loosestrife. Meadowsweet is astringent and also antacid, as well as offering anti-inflammatory and pain relieving properties. Plantain leaf will also help heal the injured tissues.

deficient acid: As mentioned above, deficient acid can be a substantial problem, inhibiting proper digestion of nutrients and potentially causing heartburn, belching, nausea, ulcers, gassiness, and many other digestive woes. While many would suggest taking betaine hydrochloride or increasing intake of vinegar, lemon juice or other dietary acids, this is merely supplementing a deficiency while failing to address its root cause. It’s my opinion that a lack of bitter foods in the diet is a huge problem in our culture. Though not a vitamin or mineral, I feel that a paucity of the bitter flavor in a person’s diet can result in its own type of deficiency syndrome, with sluggishness of the overall metabolism and deficient digestive secretion being deficiency symptoms. So, taking a small dose of some bitter tincture 15-25 minutes before meals, or better yet finding ways to include bitter foods as a part of the diet, can help remedy this problem. Doing this, you get increased stomach acid through restored production, rather than through supplementation.

gastritis*: Gastritis refers to inflammation of the stomach, and can vary in its causes and predominant symptoms. Nausea, vomiting (in some cases blood), ulcers, burning or gnawing sensations, sensitivity or discomfort from dietary fiber, and pain can all occur. While this condition is best addressed by a good doctor, herbalist or ND, a tea of demulcent, mucilaginous herbs like Slippery Elm or Marshmallow and an anti-inflammatory such as Chamomile or Peach leaf can prove very helpful to soothe the irritated tissues and ease inflammation. Tissue healing herbs such as Plantain are also quite valuable. Still, I’d again urge a trip to a qualified practitioner to ensure proper treatment in such cases.

nausea & vomiting*: There are lots of choices here: pretty much all the Mints, Ginger (especially if there is poor peripheral circulation), Peach (especially during pregnancy), angelica seeds (these are specific for dry heaves), Catnip (with anxiety). Relaxants such as Wild Yam and Cramp Bark can help ease spasms… even Lobelia, which is usually feared for its penchant for inducing vomiting, can be taken in small doses as a tincture to relax more severe stomach spasms. It is worth noting that very rarely will these herbs prevent vomiting when the body needs to get rid some offensive material.

ulcers*: Ulcers are sores occurring in the stomach. They can range from producing an uncomfortable, gnawing sensation in the stomach to outright pain, and may be associated with vomiting blood or the passing of black, tarry stools (this color is caused by digested blood in the stool). Ulcers are often linked to, though not directly caused by stress, and also deficient acid production. Though often present in non-ulcerated stomachs as well, the bacteria Helicobacter pylori. This tenacious bacterium colonizes ulcerations, and as their populations increase ulceration tends to worsen. It seems that they inhibit the healing of ulcers, and any protocol for treating ulceration should include something to get rid of these critters. My approach to ulceration combines demulcients (Slippery Elm/Marshmallow) to coat and soothe irritated and enflamed tissues, astringents (Wild Geranium, Oak Bark, Avens…) to help restore
tone to and “dry up” the ulcerated tissues (remember, ulcers, just like mouth sores are damp by nature), tissue healers like Plantain or Calendula, and something to kill the H. Pylori. Herbs know to facilitate this include Garlic, Goldenseal, Wild Bergamot, or Propolis tincture. Honey is also a good choice. While I generally make a tea of the other ingredients, I recommend taking these herbs (usually only one or two of them) as tinctures (or in the case of garlic, freshly crushed), perhaps mixed into a bit of honey water. Be aware that by their very nature as stomach inhabiting bacteria, H. pylori are tenacious. It takes steadfast compliance and consistency to really wipe them out. Think in terms of months, not weeks. Remember as well that bitter herbs help increase stomach acid, and that ulcers often are correlated with deficient acid production.

*It is important to mention that the regular use of NSAIDs (Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs) such as Tylenol, Advil, aspirin and the like are known to cause many of the problems listed above. If a person is using these pain relievers in a regular basis, any natural treatment can only be palliative, since the underlying cause will still be present.

liver/gall bladder

Yet again, I’ll reiterate that because we’re focusing on digestion, and not the larger process of metabolism, I’m only going to be addressing a small portion of the immense topic that is the liver.

sluggish liver: When herbalists or other holistically inclined folks say that the liver is “sluggish”, they are generally referring to a state in which there is diminished bile flow. This state poses a number of problems. One of great importance is that while the live creates bile, it is not meant to store bile... that’s what the Gall Bladder is for. If the liver is sluggish or congested, the bile lingers overlong in the liver, which results in damage to liver cells. This can result in jaundice. Other issues also come into play: if bile production or release is insufficient, the emulsification of lipids will be hampered, which in turn hampers the breakdown and uptake of these vital nutrients. Severely hampered bile production can result in the inability to digest fats. Also, as the bile not only acts on fats, but provides lubrication in the small intestine, deficiency can lead to constipation resultant from dryness. The most important herbs that address this state are bitters. As mentioned before, bitters stimulate the secretion of digestive fluids, and bile in particular. Again, as I mentioned when discussing deficient acid production, I’ll state that I feel that the lack of bitters in the modern diet is a primary cause of our myriad digestive dilemmas, many of which seem to be resultant from deficiency and sluggishness. Incorporating bitter foods into the diet (bitter salad greens like Dandelion, for example) or taking bitters as a tincture before meals can help immensely, as when we taste something bitter, it initiates the production and release of bile.

cramping/inflammation of the gall bladder: Spasm, cramping and/or inflammation of the gall bladder (cholecystalgia) can be excruciatingly painful. While certainly worthy of a checkup to see what’s going on, a dropperful or two of Wild Yam tincture can often calm things down, sometimes markedly. Wild Yam is both antispasmodic and anti-inflammatory to most of the organs in the abdominal cavity, and to the gall bladder specifically. Other worthy considerations are Cramp Bark (again, a dropperful or two of the tincture) or Lobelia (the tincture taken in doses of 5 to 10 drops as needed). Wild Yam, though, is probably the best place to start, and if it’s going to work, you should feel some improvement shortly after taking...
it. If you don’t feel anything after a couple doses, it probably won’t work for what you have. But, don’t expect it to erase pain entirely. I often combine Wild Yam with Agrimony, which is a mild bitter, alterative and anti-inflammatory. I think they compliment each other well. Be aware that some conventional doctors feel comfortable removing the gall bladder, even if not absolutely necessary. Personally, I’d think long and hard before letting anyone declare any of my organs “unnecessary”.

Gallstones: Gallstone cause all the pain of the spasms mentioned above, and in many ways the same herbs are used to address them. Relaxant herbs like Wild Yam, Cramp Bark and Lobelia ease the severe cramping and allow the stones to pass more easily, though the process is still likely to hurt like hell. Also, as mentioned above, this situation really does call for a look by a doc, at least initially. If a stone obstructs the bile duct, or the pancreatic duct, the consequences can be serious – you can live without a gall bladder, but not without a pancreas. So, take your Wild Yam, go see a doc, and make sure everything is cool before relying solely on herbs and a high pain threshold. Bitters can also be helpful, so long as you know the bile duct isn’t obstructed.

Never never never: Don’t do that crazy “liver/gall bladder” flush thing where you drink large quantities of lemon juice and olive oil to purge yourself of “gallstones”. The “stones” are actually created by the saponification of the olive oil by the bile... basically, the two come together and make soap, which is then rather dramatically purged from the body. The “stones” passed are by no means real gallstones, whatever proponents of such cleanses may claim. It should be noted that there is a possibility that an actual gallstone may be shunted out of the gall bladder by such a “flush”, and though uncommon, people have been hospitalized for obstruction of the gall duct, which can have potentially fatal consequences.

LOWER GI:

Constipation: Constipation is very common – everyone has probably experienced it at some point in time. One of the first things to consider is whether there is adequate intake of fiber. Without this, stool will lack the “bulk” to be squeezed effectively through the intestines. Ideally, fiber should come from a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, as opposed to simply adding some bran or psyllium, though this may be an effective temporary solution. While there are numerous herbal remedies to address this issue, it’s important to differentiate between many potential causes of constipation. Lack of bowel tone can be an issue; here you'll often (though not always) find constipation alternating with loose stools, usually more one than the other. Astringents (Wild Geranium, Blackberry, Avens) & healing mucilages (Marshmallow/Slippery Elm) are used, more astringents if loose stools predominate, more mucilages if constipation does. It’s probably good in both cases to add tissue healers like plantain and calendula. Sluggish digestion (the food moves so slowly through the digestive tract that too much water is absorbed, making it hard and difficult to pass - there's usually gas/burping with this) can be an issue... bitters and warming aromatic spices help here. Constriction could cause constipation if the intestines are all tense & cramped and inhibit peristalsis; there's often griping and gas pains involved. Aromatic bitters, carminatives and antispasmodics (Angelica, Chamomile, Wild Yam, Cramp Bark) would help. Dryness from lack of fluids (both water and oil based) can be a big issue, and may be clearly indicated by hardness of the stools. If you grind up Flax seeds and mix it 50/50 with Slippery Elm powder,
you can mix a tablespoon of this in some warm water and drink it without straining (after the slippery elm has hydrated). This provides both bulk and lubrication, and I’ve frequently seen it do miracles. If you use Plantain tea instead of water, it will heighten its healing influence to the digestive tissues. Also, dryness could be resultant from sluggish liver function, since in addition to helping to emulsify and digest lipids, bile acts as a lubricant for the GI tract. Bitters will stimulate bile production and its release, which lubricate the intestines and aid in the passage of stool. If adding fiber increases pain, that’s likely a sign that the tissues are enflamed, and the inclusion of mucilages are super important to address this. You may have noticed that I didn’t mention any of the laxative herbs, such as Senna, Cascara Sagrada or Aloe. This is because laxatives – even herbal laxatives – can lead to dependence, and are often not good first choices. Certainly, there’s a place for strong laxatives like Senna… if you’ve been constipated for several days and feel uncomfortable, and other choices haven’t worked, Senna will usually stimulate a bowel movement. Using it for acute situations like this is fine, but regular use is decidedly detrimental.

**Diarrhea:** Initially, it is important to recognize that diarrhea, especially acute diarrhea, is an important function the body uses to try to rid itself of some offending material, and shouldn’t be suppressed simply because it’s unpleasant. As with constipation, diarrhea can have several causes. Weak tissue tone can be a factor in chronic diarrhea, but can also result from intense acute diarrhea and allow that condition to persist even after offending material has been evacuated. Pretty much universally, astringents are called for to restore tone to the weakened tissues. Wild Geranium, Blackberry or Raspberry root, Avens, Staghorn Sumach bark, Cinnamon and numerous other choices exist. A syrup made from Blackberries and added to Cinnamon tea is an excellent and grateful preparation. I almost always combine astringents with some tissue healer, such as Plantain or Calendula. Purple Loosestrife flowers are nice as they are both astringent and demulcent, coating and soothing weak tissues as they astringe them. If mucous appears present in the stool, Goldenseal would be a good addition, as it is particularly restorative to mucous membrane excesses. Another factor that can come into play is rapid transit time; if the chyle moves too speedily through the colon, water is ineffectually absorbed and remains when everything gets to the end of the line. This can be the case when one doesn’t have diarrhea per se, but stool that is very soft and not easily passed. My favorite remedy here is Yellow Dock, though other sour astringents (like Staghorn Sumach berries) can be helpful. Chronic diarrhea that fails to do more than get a little bit better when various remedies are tried may be the result of food allergies. Though I’ll stress that I don’t feel that dairy or wheat is inherently bad for everyone, there is no question that it is undeniably bad for some. Many folks are likewise sensitive to unfermented Soy products, though this is more likely to produce cramping and gas than diarrhea. While I’ll discuss how you can use an elimination diet to determine whether you may have such food allergies, here I’d like to point out that if you do, you need to ditch the offending foods, and resist the temptation to use herbal or other remedies to compensate for them. This approach will only work like a band aid over an unhealing injury, and won’t serve your well being in the long run. Infections of various sorts can also cause diarrhea, and need to be addressed with appropriately (more on this later). Some medications cause diarrhea. Likewise, large doses of magnesium all at once may do the same. If this is the case, best to divvy up the dosage throughout the day, rather than take it all at once. It is worth taking yogurt/kefir/probiotics of some form after severe or lasting diarrhea to help repopulate the gut with friendly bacteria.
dehydration: Loss of fluids via diarrhea can contribute to dehydration, which can become serious. Making sure to stay well hydrated is important, and some type of electrolyte drink is indicated. Aviva Romm offers a recipe for making one yourself: Combine 1 quart water with 1 to 2 tablespoons of honey, maple syrup or sugar, ¼ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon baking soda. Give as necessary to prevent dehydration.

gas: Gas can range from an embarrassing toot at the wrong moment to a doubled-over agony. Though most often eliminated with little effort, sometimes gas accumulates and causes significant discomfort. Several foods are known to cause gas, including beans, cruciferous vegetables, carbohydrates with soluble fiber and carbonated sodas. One thing that too many people do and shouldn’t is hold their gas in. While you can certainly make a case for discretion if you’re, say, public speaking, consistently suppressing the passing of gas because of nonsensical societal views is a bad idea. There are numerous herbs that can help eliminate gas, most of them aromatics. Many familiar spices can be brewed as tea or taken as a squirt or two of tincture until release is achieved… Chamomile, Catnip, Valerian and Hops are useful when anxiety or tension is involved; Ginger and Cinnamon are good when there is poor peripheral circulation (Cinnamon especially if there is also loose stools), and Fennel, Anise, Alispice, Cardamom, Queen Anne’s Lace seeds and almost any of the mints are all very effective. If there is a lot of cramping, then include Wild Yam or Cramp Bark. A nice blend to have on hand is equal parts Fennel and Wild Yam.

colic & cramping: These are usually associated with gas, but not necessarily. Still, most of the same remedies apply. Chamomile, Catnip, Valerian, Wild Yam and Cramp Bark are the archetypal digestive antispasmodics. For children, Catnip and Chamomile are the most appropriate. Nursing mothers can drink the tea themselves for the babies to receive via breastmilk.

irritable bowel syndrome (IBS): Irritable bowel syndrome is basically a chronic panoply of inflammation, cramping, gassiness, constipation and/or diarrhea. In chronic cases it’s very likely that food allergies are at play, and an elimination diet would be in order to verify whether this is the case. In general, the recommendations for each of these maladies can be blended into a formula specific to an individuals needs. Some people may have predominantly loose stools, while others may be more constipated. Or, one might swing from one end of the spectrum to the other. So, the classes of herbs that one will likely need to pull from are carminatives and antispasmodics to deal with the gas and cramping, tissue healers to strengthen weak tissues, bitters to ensure proper secretion of digestive fluids, and demulcents and astringents as indicated. But remember, if food allergies are the cause, any treatment can only be palliative as long as the offending foods are still being consumed. Treatment of IBS should be consistent if you want to achieve lasting relief. Halfhearted treatment is less likely to resolve the issue.

leaky gut syndrome: Leaky gut syndrome refers to a condition when the lining of the intestines is weakened and lacking tone to the point that they become overly permeable, which is to say that they loose their ability to selectively allow passage of material from within the gut to within the body. Inappropriate material is allowed to cross through the gut wall, which floods the system with debris the body then needs to process, and can contribute to the rise of an
intestinal autoimmune condition as the immune system starts to regard the contents of the gut as a pathogen that needs to be attacked. This creates a major problem for the body as a whole because the gut becomes a battleground more than a place where nutrients are absorbed to be delivered to the body. This condition should be addressed with tissue healers like Plantain and Calendula, and perhaps initially a course of Comfrey, which can rapidly heal damaged tissue. Because there is much debate over the safety of Comfrey's internal use, I would encourage anyone who chooses to use it to educate themselves on both sides of the issue. For my part, I fall between the "It's fine, don't worry" and the "It's toxic to the liver, don't use it" camps, and feel comfortable using it for short periods of time to achieve a specific end. Prudence, though, dictates that I don't feel that anyone should follow y lead without learning about the issue themselves. Anyway... tissue healers, astringents (I think Wild Geranium is a nice choice), some carminative anti-inflammatory (Chamomile would be ideal) and a demulcent like Slippery Elm or Marshmallow root. Consistent use would be essential.

colon cleansing/mucoid plaque and other bulls***: Yup, this is pretty much a predatory, product selling fear mongering crock. I know, everyone and their brother has tried it, and some people rave rave rave (raving lunatics...). But let's look at some interesting points. First, LOTS of the "colon cleanses" are spiced up laxatives. If you take it, and it dramatically clears you out, it's a laxative. Look for Senna, Cascara Sagrada and Aloe up at the top of the ingredients. Regular and prolonged use of this type of laxative is dependence forming. It weakens the colon and the body's vital energy over time, though, of course, if you were constipated before taking it you may feel great for a while afterwards... at least initially. Also, the whole "everyone has 20 or 30 or XX pounds of fecal material or "mucoid plaque" in their colon" thing is totally bogus. Indisputably (but oh, people who are into this will dispute it to the ends of the earth). How can I back up my claim, you ask? Gastroenterologists. People who, day in and day out, look with cameras up people's behinds. You see, before they do this, they have the patient consume a liquid or pill that empties out the colon pretty thoroughly. People who do this don't eliminate that ropey mucoid plaque that you see pictures of in colon cleanse advertising. Then, the Doctor looks with a camera all the way up their colon. And again, no mucoid plaque. I've also talked to a guy who teaches cadaver dissection classes, who's literally cut open and looked inside a LOT of colons. Again, never seen mucoid plaque. But then, why do the people using herbal colon cleanses rid themselves of this? Could it be that the product itself creates it? Sure could be, especially if the product contains a combination of some form of clay and fiber. I really don't know exactly what the process is that creates this stuff, but I do know that the "everyone has impacted fecal material/mucoid plaque" thing is a lie. And so do the people selling the stuff. Please, don't buy it.

food allergies: If you feel your dietary woes may be resultant from dietary sensitivities, consider testing for possible food allergies. It could be that you are allergic to gluten, dairy or unfermented soy (actually, I don't think unfermented soy is a good dietary choice at all...); if this is the case, no therapies are likely to really resolve the problem unless you completely eliminate all of the allergen from the diet. There are two ways of figuring out if this is the case:

1.) You can try an elimination diet. If you do have an allergy to a food, even using herbs effectively is only masking the cause, and so not really ideal. An analogy that puts it into perspective would be if you were standing on hot coals, and would put aloe on your feet a
couple times a day. Even though the aloe is good for burns, it is unlikely to be especially helpful if the cause of the burns (standing on hot coals) isn't addressed.

The process of doing an elimination diet is rather simple, if the same cannot be said for its execution. Simply choose a suspected allergen to eliminate (let’s say wheat and other food containing gluten), and eliminate it entirely from the diet for 2-4 weeks. It’s probably worth doing a four week trial to make the most of the opportunity. Be sure that you don’t consume anything with gluten; that even means reading all ingredient lists for miniscule quantities. Notice whether, over the ensuing weeks, your digestive problems change, improve, worsen, stay the same. Then, at the end of your trial, you do a rechallenge by consuming the food you’d eliminated fairly liberally. Note any changes. If you felt better and better as the weeks of elimination progressed, then felt like you got hit by a truck, then that’s a pretty good sign that that particular food isn’t good for you to eat, and needs to go. Wait a few weeks before trying another food. Yes, its time consuming and intense, but your body won't lie. And it’s an economically feasible option for pretty much anyone.

2.) If you just can’t seem to do that, or you need some more quantitative proof to make you feel you aren’t imagining results, there are lab tests that can be done, but be aware that the accuracy of these tests is highly suspect. A recent paper on this topic by Sheryl Miller at Bastyr Naturopathic University’s Natural Health Clinic concluded that “food allergy testing by IgG ELISA/EIA panels is a convenient and easy way to diagnose food allergies in a patient. It is, however, a testing method that is questionable in both its theory and validity. It is also costly and may not be reliable, depending on which laboratory you use. An argument in its favor by certain physicians is that it is extremely popular with patients because it gives printed proof to the patient that the patient is allergic to certain foods. This makes it easier for the doctor to convince the patient that they need to change their diet. Is this printed proof however, a very costly substitute for discussion with and education of patients? Would patients insist on this test if they knew they may not be reliable?”

Yes, the prospect of a food allergy does suck, because yes, you probably love the food you’re allergic to. And food allergies certainly don’t make eating out or shopping particularly easy. But put things in perspective: learning to read ingredients labels and how to cook for yourself versus chronic gas, cramping and diarrhea... puts things into perspective, eh?

infections

Like all tissues in the body, those of the GI tract can become infected. Bacterial, viruses, yeast and parasites are all factors that can adversely affect bowel health. While recognizing the reality of that, we also should be aware that very often too much emphasis is placed on killing pathogens, as opposed to healing tissues and supporting function. It is frequently the case that infections are actually a result of overgrowth of critters that are supposed to be in the gut, but have grown imbalanced because the environment they live in has been imbalanced in their favor. By focusing treatment of bowel problems on high doses or prolonged use of antibacterials, antifungals or antiparasitics, we kill these organisms but do little to restore the environment they exist in. Over time, this will weaken digestion, and lessen the body’s vital energy. Taking that into consideration....
candida: The yeast candida is a pretty good example of the points made above. It’s supposed to be in your body, existing naturally in the GI tract, the vagina and on the skin, but can spread when conditions become unbalanced (antibiotic use or other disruptions of the bacteria in the gut can cause this). Using yogurt/kefir/probiotics to replenish healthy bacteria is incredibly important, both after any course of antibiotics to prevent candida overgrowth, or to restore a proper intestinal ecology if candida has become a problem. Very high sugar/carb diets can also trigger candida overgrowth, since sugar is yeast’s favorite food. Many people use oil of oregano to deal with candida overgrowth, but I’m of the opinion that this is a rather strong tactic, and not one that restores the ecosystem of the gut, even if it very effectively kills the candida. Rather, eating plenty of Garlic, taking small doses of Wild Bergamot tincture or drinking Wild Bergamot tea, Goldenseal tincture, or Black Walnut can be helpful, so long as they’re a part of a larger protocol, and not the basis of it.

But “having candida” is often an oversimplification for a larger condition of dysbiosis, a general imbalance of gut microorganisms. Maybe candida is the predominant one in excess, but it might not be. The problem here, as alluded to above, is not just that there’s too much of one or another “bad gut bacteria”, but the imbalance itself. Probiotics and fermented foods are immensely important here. There has been some research that indicates that Rose petals will inhibit the growth of E. coli & Staph bacteria and in the gut while not significantly hampering “good” microorganisms. I suspect many herbs traditionally used for chronic bowel complaints work the same way, though I don’t know of studies to back up this belief.

stomach flu: bacterial and viral illnesses can also, as most people have experienced, wreak havoc on one’s innards. While some colds and flus are primarily respiratory in nature, others instigate vomiting, diarrhea or both. In these cases, the herbs covered early can be useful, but it’s worth making some addition points. Diaphoretics are a class of herbs used to treat colds, flus and fevers by directing circulation and ventilation of the body. Many of these herbs are aromatics, and also act on digestive issues. In particular, the Mints, Catnip, and Ginger are all specific to flus with nausea and vomiting. Mints are rather general in their action, while catnip is indicated by a lot of tension, anxiety, and inability to “take it easy”. Ginger should be given when there is poor peripheral circulation and the skin is some degree of pale and cool (if the skin is red and hot, there’s already adequate outward circulation and no need to stimulate it further). If diarrhea is an issue, Cinnamon will act as both an astringent to stop the diarrhea (and in so doing help to prevent dehydration) and a diaphoretic, directing circulation outward. Goldenseal can act as a contact antimicrobial to the GI tract to help deal with infections as well (though it does not work as an “antibiotic” in the body at large).

poisoning: Bacterial contamination of food or water can cause poisoning with severe digestive issues. This is a case where a trip to see a qualified practitioner is in order, as opposed to self treatment.

worms/parasites: The issue of parasites is an interesting one, as there is a subset of the natural health culture who feels that we’re all full of parasites that our sucking away at our life and vitality and need to regularly “cleanse them out”. Please remember, though, that regular use of large or prolonged doses of antimicrobial/antiparasitic herbs depletes digestive wellness and the body’s vital energy over time. I’d also offer my opinion that the position that we’re all full of parasites and need to do regular parasite cleanses is, on the whole, nuts. I recently
heard about a case of a person “cleansing” their child of parasites (with no objective info to confirm their presence). He was vomiting for about 5 days and they wondered if this was good. The “cleanse” had Male Fern in it, which is decidedly harsh and toxic. Egad. So, one of the first things to ask in regards to the “parasite” issue is “Why do you think you have parasites?” If the answer is vague and unspecific, or relates to someone suggesting that you should do it along with a “colon cleanse”, then I would suggest ceasing and desisting.

In the instances where parasites are an issue, in a lot of cases herbs are harsher on the body than drugs (sad but true), and may be the way to go.

Pinworms (creepy) can be verified visually in many cases, and are often initially sensed as a dreadful itching sensation of the anus, experienced as the mama worms creep out of the colon to lay their teeny tiny eggs. The eggs eventually end up floating through the air and everywhere, are inhaled, and end up in the gut raising more little critters. Yes, far creepier than any horror movie. Garlic, garlic, garlic for everyone in the household can eventually break the cycle. Impeccable cleanliness, both personal and household, is also essential.

So…
That’s that, though I’ll remind you that this was just a cursory overview of an unstateably huge topic, and one that warrants further study. I’d encourage you to look more deeply into many of these specific issues by checking out some of the articles housed in my article index: www.herbcraft.org/articleindex.html. Scroll down to the “digestive” heading and delve off into the valuable insights of some of the many gifted herbalists who’ve shared their expertise with us online.

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