



ASHEVILLE INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

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Stomach Healing

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Healing the gut is fundamental to curing many systemic conditions. Poor stomach function can cause incomplete digestion, inadequate absorption of nutrients, food allergies, and imbalanced gut ecology. Digestive difficulties can contribute to many symptoms including heartburn, indigestion, bowel irregularity, and perhaps even systemic complaints such as allergies, Fibromyalgia and arthritic pain. The treatment of these illnesses often requires restoration of proper gut function.

Eating habits are often discounted as a source of digestive problems. Taking the time to chew food breaks it down and mixes it with saliva; this is intended to be the first part of the digestive process. Drinking large amounts while eating can dilute saliva and other digestive juices which may already be compromised. The environment also affects the digestive process. Highly stimulating situations put the body in “fight or flight” mode and digestion is turned off. It takes a significant conscious effort to change these established habits.

The second phase of digestion is in the stomach where food is mixed with hydrochloric acid (HCl) and churned up into even smaller particles. Inadequate excretion of HCl, or Hypochlorhydria, is a major contributor to poor digestion. As we age levels of HCl consistently decline. The gold standard test to evaluate stomach acid levels is The Heidelberg Gastrogram. This test has recently become available at Asheville Integrative Medicine. Treatment is aimed at increasing stomach acid. The first recommendation is to avoid acid blocking medications. These are tempting as hypochlorhydria is often accompanied by a burning sensation since those same cells that produce HCl also make mucous. Mucous is nature’s way of protecting the stomach wall from these necessary acids. Therefore treatment is often combined with supporting this mucous lining. In some cases it may be beneficial to initially supplement with HCl or apple cider vinegar. Restoring acid levels to the proper range can show immediate improvement in well-being.

Helicobacter Pylori is another common stomach problem as it affects 1 out of 3 Americans. More than 90% of people who develop stomach ulcers test positive for H. Pylori, and eradication is usually curative. With its coiled shape for burrowing into the stomach wall, it is the only bacterium that is known to be able to survive in the highly acidic environment of the stomach. The discovery of the important role of H. Pylori in conditions such as gastritis, peptic ulcer, and other gut related complaints, was a revolution in gastrointestinal medicine.

Reflux is one of the most disrupting symptoms which alert the sufferer to stomach dysfunction. Causes stem from factors which decrease stomach emptying and/or decrease lower esophageal sphincter (LES) tone, allowing food to wash back up to the esophagus. These include low acid, obesity, mint, smoking, incomplete chewing, too large meals, stress, hiatal hernia and, again, H. Pylori. Irritants, such as coffee, food allergies, aspirin, ibuprofen, steroids and alcohol can also cause the LES to dysfunction and can decrease mucous production, causing painful and damaging reflux. This symptom directs attention to general stomach dysfunction.

The end result of stomach dysfunction is poor digestion and malabsorption of nutrients. This then leads to atrophy of the stomach lining and further malabsorption. The stomach is than vulnerable to infection, ulcers and loss of correct function which compromises each successive step in the digestive process. We can begin to rebuild our ability to heal by removing obstacles such as hypochlorhydria, infection, or hernia and by replenishing supplies of nutrients which are deficient due to malabsorption or used up in repair processes. Investing in proper digestive function is the keystone to rebuilding systemic health and immunity.