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The nine metres of digestive tract are compressed into a relatively short body

Digestion

by Keith Souter

The digestive system is central to our whole being! When I say that I do not mean to be flippant, because it actually is a central feature of our anatomy. In a sense, the digestive tract is a long tube, around which our various tissues and organs are arranged. The food we take in is passed along that tube, being altered by grinding, chemical reaction and enzymatic breakdown. We absorb nutrients from it and dispel unwanted products of digestion as it passes, finally getting rid of the waste matter with the passage of a bowel movement. And the amazing thing is that it is, like most of our body workings, an automatic and well-nigh continuous process.

A long dynamic tube

If you look at an earthworm or even a snake, then you get a fairly clear impression of the tubular nature of their digestive tracts. They seem to have very simple anatomies with literally straight digestive systems that run the length of their bodies. By contrast the nine metres of the digestive tract of the human being is convoluted and compressed into a relatively short body. This curious anatomy that we have makes diagnosis of problems extremely difficult at times. Abdominal pain, for example, can arise from several organs, or from different parts of the digestive system, and the pain-sufferer may not be able to pinpoint where the pain is coming from. If we were simple long tubes, like the earthworm or snake, then you would probably have a clearer idea of the source of a pain.

A knowledge of the anatomical positions of the various organs and of the position that the digestive tract takes up within the abdominal cavity helps to identify where a problem may be coming from. Again taking pain as an example, acute discomfort in the right lower quadrant of the abdomen could be indicative of appendicitis,

whereas pain in the top of the abdomen, just below the breast bone suggests pain from the stomach, while pain in the right upper quadrant of the abdomen, just under the ribs is more suggestive of a problem with the gall bladder.

But to think of the digestive tract as a long pipe is obviously to oversimplify it. It is a dynamic tube, the different parts of which have specific functions. Digestion begins the moment that food is taken into the system. The smooth muscles of the digestive tract move food along, breaking it up, grinding and mixing it with a sequential outpouring of chemicals and enzymes in order to reduce it into absorbable nutrients. Ultimately, waste products and indigestible residues are passed out of the body as faeces.

The contents of the bowel are also worth considering, because they do not just consist of a slurry of digested matter and waste products. Your intestine is actually home to many millions of micro-organisms. They are not being passed out with every bowel movement, but live within the intestine and are part of the total body mass that comprises the individual. They are as much part of you as are the hairs on your head and the nails on your fingers and toes. But, more importantly, you and they are living in harmonious co-existence. You need them as they need you. They actually fulfil a valuable role in your digestive processes, and in maintaining your health. The average human body mass consists of 75 to 100 trillion cells. Up to 30 trillion of these are bacteria, the majority of which inhabit the digestive system. Considering those figures, you will see that there is plenty of scope for things to go wrong.

The extent of the problem

Digestive problems are extremely common in general practice, accounting

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for between 15 and 20 per cent of GP consultations. The majority of these problems are disorders of function, such as so-called functional dyspepsia, constipation and irritable bowel syndrome. Indeed, it is estimated that these three disorders make up about 60 per cent of all referrals to specialist gastroenterology clinics.

There certainly seems to have been a change in the pattern of some gastrointestinal disorders over the years, partly because of improvements in diagnostic tests and treatment advances. Surgery for peptic ulceration is now relatively rare, thanks to the development of several generations of drugs and the discovery of the role of the micro-organism *Helicobacter pylori* in chronic dyspepsia.

Having said all that, conventional medicine has little to offer people with functional problems. Symptom control with anti-spasmodics, fibre bulking agents and laxatives form the main emphasis of treatment. However, quite simply, they have only a limited usefulness for the sufferer.

Some tips to aid digestion

I make no claims for any type of diet. Yet the following are factors that I feel are worth considering. They alone may make a difference to one's digestive system.

- Drink a cup of boiled water in the morning before breakfast. This seems to cleanse the stomach and often works wonders.
- Eat slowly. One of the main causes of indigestion is unchewed food.
- Don't eat food " piping hot ". Our stomachs are not meant to have hot foods inside them. A useful thing to remember is that if it is hot in the mouth it is hot in the stomach. This includes tea and coffee. Food and drinks that are too hot may disrupt enzymes and injure the lining of the stomach. So, always wait for it to cool.
- Do not eat on the hoof. Meals should be taken at a leisurely pace. If you eat on the move, there is more chance that digestion will not begin. Instead foods in the stomach and intestine will start to ferment, producing gases that bloat you.

- Avoid eating fruit with the meal. Tempting though it is, because it seems lighter on the stomach than puddings, it is not good at the end of a meal. This is because fruit digests faster than dense proteins, so fermentation and gas accumulation may occur.
- If bloating is a persistent problem, try simplifying your meals. Instead of having lots of food groups at one meal try separating them. For example, proteins need acid enzyme digestive juices, whereas carbohydrates need alkaline enzyme digestive juices. When you have to break down both types all at once you are not achieving optimal enzymatic action, so some fermentation and gas accumulation may occur.
- Try taking slightly smaller servings and think twice about second helpings. As a good rule of thumb, try to get into the habit of estimating the quantity you allow yourself using "nature's food bowl". Cup your two hands together as if you were using them to make a bowl. The quantity of food that would fill that "bowl" should be your maximum at any meal.
- Make sure that you drink enough water. Ideally, hydrate your stomach with a glass of water half an hour before a meal.

Homeopathy and digestive symptoms

Homeopathy has great proven worth in dealing with many digestive complaints. And since homeopathy depends upon the individual's own experience of a symptom, it has terrific scope for self-management of symptoms and minor complaints. For this reason I am not going to discuss any actual pathology, but merely run through some common symptoms, starting at the top of the wonderful dynamic tube that is the digestive tract and looking at the indications of some of the remedies which might help.

But first, be aware of certain warning symptoms which should not be ignored. An early medical opinion and diagnosis is important in the following situations:

- sudden severe abdominal pain;
- vomiting, especially if accompanied by abdominal distension;

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Drinking a cup of boiled water before breakfast often works wonders

- weight loss which is not from deliberate dieting;
- alteration in the normal bowel habit, either with persistent looseness or constipation;
- bleeding from the back passage.

The remedies that I have included in this brief look at the digestive system are by no means a definitive listing for each of these groups, but they are ones that I use frequently.

Difficulty swallowing

We call this symptom “dysphagia”. It is a symptom that I would always advise someone to have checked out by a health professional. Once that has been done, there are a handful of remedies that can ease the symptom and which may bring about a cure.

Asafoetida is a truly wonderful remedy when the individual actually feels “reverse peristalsis”, that is, waves of movement travelling up the oesophagus and carrying food back to the mouth. Indeed, this reverse peristalsis (peristalsis being the name for the movement of food or residues down the digestive tract) can occur anywhere along the length of the alimentary canal.

Globus hystericus is the name given to the sensation of having a lump in the throat. This is usually present all the time, but may seem so acute when faced with food that it cannot be eaten. Ignatia is the remedy of choice here, especially when swallowing is so difficult that choking occurs. It is a remedy that is often chosen in highly-strung, almost hysterical individuals. If such a problem occurs after a shock or bereavement then this remedy may settle it completely.

When the difficulty in swallowing is associated with a bloated feeling in the throat, and if the individual dislikes tight clothes, scarves and high necklines, then think of Lachesis.

Difficulty caused by a splinter-like sensation in the throat, in one prone to irritability may well indicate that Nitric acid is needed. This individual is almost certainly going to fear the worst, since they tend to worry excessively about their health.

Heartburn

This symptom refers to the burning sensation that the individual experiences as acid is squirted into the oesophagus from the stomach. A sensation is felt rising through the chest up to the back of the throat.



“Nature’s bowl” shows you how much to eat at any meal

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Calcarea carbonica is very good at relieving chronic heartburn in chubby people who get cramps in the stomach, really burning heartburn and who belch noisily. Often they get a sour taste in their throats after belching. Milk often disagrees with them and produces heartburn and indigestion, whereas for most people milk helps.

When heartburn and regurgitation occurs after only small snacks then Lycopodium will probably bring relief. Typically, the heartburn only spreads up as far as the Adam’s apple, but it tends to last for hours at a time, despite antacids or milk. The stomach often feels bloated during these episodes.

Pulsatilla is indicated when heartburn is associated with the taste of a food taken hours before. Fatty foods, butter and pork seem to cause these bouts of heartburn, and it is more likely to occur when they are peeved about something or with someone. They rarely feel thirsty.

Dyspepsia

Dyspepsia is a pain or an uncomfortable feeling in the upper part of the abdomen, usually related to food or meals. It is what most people refer to as indigestion. The pain might come and go, but it is usually there most of the time. It can occur at any age and about a quarter of the population will experience it at some time. There are many causes of dyspepsia, and if it is prolonged, then a medical opinion should be sought.

A band-like pain in the upper abdomen which comes on when the person is hungry, and which is relieved for two or three hours after eating, only

to recur again, calls out for Anacardium. Indecisiveness is typical with someone in need of this remedy.

Dyspepsia associated with nausea, a gnawing pain in the upper abdomen and retching of mucus suggest the remedy Argentum nitricum. These folk are often hurried, full of fears, especially as they anticipate a meeting or event, and prone to bouts of loose motions.

Nux vomica is well known to people as a remedy of excess, or over-indulgence. The pains classically come on about two hours after food. Like Argentum nitricum these people are hurried, but they are less likely to be fearful. Irritability and anger are more in keeping with their temperament.

By contrast, sweet, gentle and self-sacrificing people who experience flatulence and dyspepsia after too many starchy or fatty foods may need Natrum carbonicum. They cannot take milk and very often have multiple food allergies.

Phosphorus is extremely useful in people given to ready vomiting with their dyspepsia. They crave cold drinks, which seem to help for a short time, only to be vomited ten minutes or so later.

Bloating

Bloating is a real problem with a lot of people and may arise from excess gas in the stomach, small intestines or the colon. The resting gas level can vary from a few millilitres to several litres and people literally expand by several inches in the course of the day.

There are three remedies that I think are particularly good for this. The first is Carbo vegetabilis, which is made from

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wood charcoal. As you will recall from your chemistry lessons, charcoal is a great absorber of gas. This is a useful remedy when the individual feels chilly, blown up like a drum, and when passing wind both up and down produces ease. Next is China when the same feeling of bloating is not relieved by passing wind. People who gain the most from this remedy are great fantasists with a rich fantasy life. Lastly is Lycopodium again. These people are often quite serious types and they classically experience problems in the late afternoon and early evening.

Colic

This is a specific type of pain resulting from spasm in a hollow organ, usually the small or large intestine. Unlike dyspepsia, it is more likely to be felt in the middle and lower abdomen.

Chamomilla is the remedy most used for teething and colic in infants. Typically it produces irritability, a desire to be carried and a flushed look. In children, one cheek may be flushed.

Magnesia phosphorica is useful for colic in gentle types, who feel ease for the application of heat and gentle rubbing of the part. Passing wind does not seem to help. By contrast, Colocynth is helpful in cases in which the colic comes on when the person has been angered or frustrated. The pain is likely to be central, griping and greatly relieved by passing wind.

Cuprum metallicum is a useful remedy when colic comes on after a journey. The pains can be so bad that they make the individual shake and tremble.

Constipation

This refers to infrequent, difficult and sometimes painful evacuation of the bowels. In many ways it is a subjective complaint, since normal opening of the bowels varies from person to person, some people going normally only once or twice a week, and others going normally three or four times a day. Sustained alteration of the bowel habit needs checking.

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Aloe is useful in treating haemorrhoids

Alumina is an excellent remedy for very severe constipation in elderly people when the desire to open the bowels seems to have been lost. The individual may sit and strain and even feel impelled to use fingers to try to expel hard, knotty motions.

Petite, shy individuals who produce large hard motions when they do open their bowels may be helped by Baryta carbonica. Bryonia is helpful for people who get constipated when they travel and who experience a burning sensation when they open their bowels in this constipated state.

Calcarea carbonica is useful in chubby people who paradoxically quite like the sensation of being constipated. They may lose the desire to open their bowels, but suffer no ill effects from it.

For children who get quite distressed when they strain to open their bowels, only to feel as if the motion recedes back inside them in between straining attempts to pass it, Silica is useful. Straining almost always produces a stinging sensation in the back passage.

Diarrhoea

Acute episodes of diarrhoea can leave the individual feeling quite drained and weak, as the result of electrolyte loss. Replacement of fluids and electrolytes is the mainstay of treatment, but the

following remedies can nip an attack in the bud.

Arsenicum album is extremely useful in very neat, anxious, restless people. The diarrhoea produces a burning sensation around the anus, which may become quite red and inflamed. The motions are usually watery and offensive.

For cases which start in the early morning or just after midnight China is useful. The motions are watery with undigested residues present, together with much mucus.

Sulphur is useful for people who are forced out of bed every morning, often at 5 or 6am, by a sudden desire to open the bowels. The motions are loose and extremely offensive. Podophyllum also helps the sudden urge to open the bowels, especially when the diarrhoea is almost explosive. There is much gas, much noise and the motions splatter the toilet bowl. There is usually a lot of gurgling in the abdomen before the urge comes.

Haemorrhoids

Haemorrhoids or piles are actually varicose veins of the rectum. If you can match the right remedy to the symptoms then a dramatic change can be produced.

Aesculus is made from horse chestnut, and the appearance of the horse chestnut in its prickly coat gives an indication of the pattern of symptoms. It feels as if there are small sticks or a prickly chestnut shell in the back passage. The sufferer may experience shooting pains which go right up the back.

When the haemorrhoids protrude like a bunch of grapes Aloe is useful. They are sore and there may be uncertainty as to whether gas or motions will be passed when the urge comes.

Hamamelis is the commonest remedy used for soreness and bleeding haemorrhoids while Nitric acid is useful when the individual is generally irritable and has a splinter-like sensation in the back passage. Finally, when itching, burning and swelling occur then Paeonia may work wonders.

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