

## 8 Easy Steps to Digestive Health

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The health of our digestive system is central to our well-being. Following these simple steps can have a surprisingly dramatic impact on overall health, as well as on specific digestive concerns.

1. **Chew** your food well. Remember our stomachs don't have teeth! The more work we do before swallowing, the more nutrients we'll receive. Try chewing each bite 15 times; work up to 30. See how you feel.
2. **Eat** a variety of **color**: colorful fruits and vegetables are loaded with antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and fiber.
3. To encourage elimination, eat at least 2 **high-fiber foods** each day (whole grains; raw fruits with skins and dried fruits; raw or lightly cooked vegetables; nuts and seeds with skins; beans, peas, lentils; ground flax seeds).
4. Eat live, **cultured foods** daily to maintain healthy gut flora (sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, kombucha, yogurt and other cultured dairy).
5. To increase digestive secretions and dispel cramps or gas, try incorporating some digestive kitchen **herbs** into your favorite recipes ~ **fennel, caraway, ginger, cardamom** – or into tea blends – **chamomile, licorice, cinnamon, peppermint**.
6. Drink 2 glasses of quality filtered **water** in the morning, before coffee or tea. Drink another before going to bed. Drink plenty of fluid throughout the day. Avoid taking lots of fluids with meals, as this can dilute digestive secretions.
7. **Breathe** deeply, especially upon rising and going to bed. Consider taking a break in the day to stretch your body and take some deep breaths – these move your diaphragm, which massages your digestive organs.
8. **Eat** while **relaxed** and peaceful, taking time to enjoy your food and being aware of nourishing yourself. Offer thanks ~ in whatever way suits you ~ for the gift of food and the lives and work that brought it to you. Gratitude is nourishment for us, too.

### Why is good digestion so important?

The organs of the gastro-intestinal tract ensure breakdown, absorption and assimilation of the foods that nourish every cell in our bodies—we are what we can assimilate!

Elements of the digestive system also function as part of the immune system. Healthy mucosal lining, adequate stomach acid and digestive enzymes, and a robust community of beneficial intestinal bacteria are the first barrier to foreign materials (like bacteria) traveling deeper into our bodies. Further, an extensive accumulation of immune cells are found in and around the gut. This means that if digestion is incomplete (or if we eat foods we are sensitive to on a regular basis), our immune system can easily be activated. This process can cause chronic inflammation which can lead to a variety of acute symptoms and chronic diseases.

Mood is also strongly affected by digestive health. Since our digestive organs are exposed to so much 'information' (i.e. food) from our environments, we can imagine our gut as another sense organ which filters and interprets the nature of our surroundings for us. In fact, the enteric nervous system (nervous tissue found in the gut) sends nine times as many message to the brain as it receives, leading some researchers to wonder if the brain is really the organ 'in charge'. So, it's no surprise that many people experience an improvement in mood and energy levels when their diets are rich in fresh, colorful foods and when their digestive systems function effectively to assimilate those foods and protect us from harmful substances.

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