4 Weeks to Healthy Digestion

A Harvard Doctor’s Proven Plan for Reducing Symptoms of Diarrhea • Constipation • Heartburn • and More

Includes a Food Log and Recipes

Norton J. Greenberger, M.D.
Clinical Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School
with Roanne Weisman
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Introduction

Some people have an “iron stomach” and can eat or drink anything without a problem. You probably know a few of these people! That exceptional group notwithstanding, most of us do react to what we eat or drink. For some, indigestion happens only rarely, as a result of overindulging in the wrong kinds of food or drink choices, while for others—and you may be in this category—digestion problems happen much more often.

Living with a Sensitive Stomach

You are probably interested in this book because you have a sensitive stomach: a gastrointestinal (GI) system that reacts strongly to what you put into it. This is called visceral hyperalgesia, which simply means that you have chronic GI distress. Symptoms of your distress might include diarrhea, constipation, heartburn (also called gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD), dyspepsia (recurrent abdominal pain), bloating, or gas.

The problem with such chronic GI distress is that it’s what is called a functional disorder, which means that there is nothing structurally wrong with your digestion system. There is also no disease present that can be “cured.” You and your doctor may be frustrated because there is usually no one thing you can do—no pill to take, no operation to undergo—that will make the problem go away. So, how do you cope?

Living with a sensitive gut takes understanding, a positive attitude, and a commonsense approach to managing your temperamental digestion. The understanding and the commonsense approach will, I hope, come from this book. Your positive attitude may come from the fact that while your digestion problems are both real and difficult, they are not life threatening. Moreover, as you will see as you read further, they do not have to be a burden or interfere with your daily activities.

How to Use This Book

The focus of this book—as well as of the Four-Week Plan for Healthy Digestion—is first and foremost on healthy nutrition. As the saying goes, you are what you eat. I would expand that concept to digestion: your digestion depends on what and even how you eat. Every digestion problem discussed in this book is closely tied not only to everything that goes into your mouth—including foods, beverages, medications, vitamins, supplements, snacks, and even that after-dinner mint—but also to your method of eating. For example, do you “inhale” your food without taking the time to chew it fully? Do you eat in an atmosphere of stress? These habits are not conducive to digestive health. By contrast, calm, slow mealtimes and chewing every bite thoroughly both help to improve your digestion.

The key to a healthy, comfortable digestion is mindfulness about what you eat and how you eat, as well as close attention to your symptoms. To help you, I have included a Food and Symptom Log in Chapter 1 as a template for you to record this information. The log you maintain will give you an excellent point of reference to begin discussing the best digestion solutions with your doctor. Chapter 9, “Communicating with Your Doctor,” offers suggestions on how to do this.
The first chapter describes the Four-Week Plan in general terms. Chapters on specific symptoms follow, and you can pick and choose the sections that apply to you. In those chapters, you will find more detailed guidance about using the Four-Week Plan, including which foods to avoid or include, as well as any specific lifestyle changes that apply. If you are a woman, Chapter 8, “For Women Only,” will be of interest, since your gut reacts to your female hormones, as well as to your menstrual cycle and to menopause. Finally, for anyone who likes to cook, Part 2 has some delicious and digestion-friendly recipes, organized according to symptom.

About Me

In more than forty-five years of practicing, teaching, and writing about gastrointestinal medicine, I have seen thousands of patients with complaints just like the ones that you may be enduring: painful and uncomfortable digestive problems that interfere with daily life. In caring for these patients, I have come to two important realizations:

- Most people do not recognize the extent to which their dietary habits can cause recurrent gastrointestinal distress.
- Many doctors do not take the time to probe the diet and eating habits of their patients by taking a complete dietary history.

These two determinations are what prompted me to write this book—my first for the general public, although I have written or contributed to many textbooks and journal articles. I have written this book to help people understand how the gastrointestinal system works. When you have that understanding, it is often easy to adopt simple lifestyle and diet changes that will resolve, or at least alleviate, your digestion problems.

Before going any further, I’d like to introduce you to your digestive system! The following section may give you some surprising information about the complex and precisely coordinated group of organs packed into your abdomen. Read on to discover how the system is supposed to work. This will give you a better understanding of what happens when things go wrong—and how to regain proper digestive functioning.

Your Gastrointestinal System: More than Digestion

Two glorious scoops of gourmet ice cream are waiting in a bowl in front of you. You pick up your spoon, anticipating the sweetness of that first cold, creamy taste.

This is hardly the time you want to be thinking about your gastrointestinal system, but indulge me for a moment, since that is what this book is about. You may be reading this book because you are having some problems with your digestion. The Four-Week Plan is designed to help you manage these problems, but before we launch into the plan, it is important to understand the gastrointestinal system and how it is supposed to work.

One way to think of your gastrointestinal system is as a twenty-five-foot-long “processing plant” that is compactly folded so that it fits into your abdomen. The largest part of this system is the alimentary canal, described in detail later. Everything that goes into your mouth, including food, beverages, medications, and any nutritional supplements, passes through this canal before it leaves your body. The GI system does far more than transport food, however. Before the food leaves your
body, the system also breaks it down into molecules of substances that your body needs in order to live—proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water. It then delivers these vital sources of life and health directly into your bloodstream, which carries the nutrients to every cell, tissue, and organ. Connected to the alimentary canal are several “accessory” organs that produce digestive juices, enzymes, and acids that help break down the food. Whatever nutrients your body does not use for “fuel”—nourishment—are discarded as stool or urine.

What Is the Alimentary Canal?
The alimentary canal begins in the mouth and throat, through which food passes on its way to a muscular tube called the esophagus. The rhythmic contractions of the esophagus move food downward toward a muscular ring, called the esophageal sphincter, which opens at the appropriate time to allow food to pass through into the stomach. The stomach is connected to the small bowel (small intestine), which empties into the colon (large intestine). At the end of the journey is the rectum, which releases waste products as stool. Liquid waste is processed through the kidneys and bladder, passing out of the body through the urethra as urine. (See Figure 1.1.)

Connected to various parts of the alimentary canal are three “accessory” organs: the liver, gallbladder, and pancreas, all of which

Figure 1.1 The Digestive System
The drawing shows the lower part of the esophagus along with the stomach, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, small bowel or small intestine, and large bowel or colon. All of these organs play a leading role in healthy digestion, interact with exquisite complexity and precision timing, beginning with that first bite of food. Working in concert, they release the precise amounts of digestive enzymes, acids, and juices needed at every stage of digestion, helping food and liquids move efficiently through the system.

A Symphony of Sustenance

Now, finally, let us return to that melting bowl of ice cream and watch how your gastrointestinal system responds to it. Each organ in the system has a part to play, at a particular time, almost as if it were a member of an orchestra being cued into action by an invisible conductor. In the GI system, the “conductors” of this “symphony of sustenance” are actually hormones—chemical messengers—released by the stomach and small intestine in the presence of food. These hormones trigger the
First, even before you take a bite, your eyes, your sense of smell, and even your imagination are preparing you for the treat to come: The salivary glands in your mouth begin to produce saliva in anticipation. (If you doubt the power of your mind to affect your digestion, try just thinking about chewing on a piece of fresh lemon, and notice the extra saliva in your mouth!) As you put food into your mouth, the saliva is ready to work, moistening the food to make it easier for the teeth to grind into smaller pieces for swallowing. This ice cream, of course, needs no chewing, but meat and vegetables certainly do, and as I point out in Chapters 1 and 5, sufficient chewing is important for healthy digestion. When the food reaches the stomach, enzymes, digestive juices, and acids break it into still smaller pieces, sending it down to the first part of the small bowel, which triggers the gallbladder to squeeze and contract, releasing juices and bile into the small bowel to break the food down still further.

The liver, the largest organ in the body, is like a factory, producing proteins and bile that are stored in the gallbladder until they are needed for digestion. The liver also stores iron, vitamins, and trace elements from the food you eat. One of the most important liver functions is to act as the body’s “detoxifier,” metabolizing all foods, beverages, and medicines to remove harmful elements before sending them back out into the body so that they can be effectively used and their by-products can be easily excreted. (Drinking too much alcohol can put a strain on the liver’s detoxifying process and, if carried out over years, can cause it to enlarge, which can result in cirrhosis. This is a condition in which the liver becomes scarred and all of its functions are compromised.)

When food enters the small bowel, it also triggers the pancreas to release pancreatic enzymes that help digest proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. The pancreas also releases insulin, which is important in metabolizing sugars. (A deficiency of insulin results in diabetes. Chapter 7 features the specific digestion problems of people with diabetes.) Together, the bile salts from the gallbladder and the pancreatic juices break down these food substances into molecules that can be absorbed across the lining of the small bowel into the bloodstream and transported throughout the body. After this digestion has taken place, the breakdown products stop the pancreas and gallbladder from producing their enzymes and acids, again with perfect timing.

Any food products that are not absorbed through the lining of the small bowel continue into the colon (large intestine), a wider tube that is shorter than the small bowel. In the colon, bacteria work to digest any remaining food. The upper part of the colon also absorbs remaining fluids and bile salts. Anything left over is waste that the body does not need, so muscle contractions push it into the rectum, where it is stored until it is ready to be released through the anus as a bowel movement.

To return to your ice cream: When it enters the first part of the small bowel, it triggers the release of bile and pancreatic juices. When the digestion of the ice cream is complete, the upper bowel releases chemicals that “turn off” the pancreas and the gallbladder. The digested sugars and fats from the ice cream are then ready to be absorbed. This summary illustrates the exquisite regulation of something as simple as eating ice cream.

In all, it takes about six to twelve hours for that ice cream to make its way through the entire gastrointestinal system. A heavier meal, especially if it contains fat, will slow the stomach down...
and extend the digestive process. As you read through the GI “problem” chapters that follow, it may be useful to refer back to this section for a better understanding of which processes are being interfered with and how you can use the Four-Week Plan to restore a healthy gut!

**Healthy Digestion**

I hope that this understanding of your gastrointestinal system has inspired you to begin the Four-Week Plan to reduce uncomfortable symptoms and reclaim your digestive health. If you are ready, start with Chapter 1 to learn how the Four-Week Plan can help you. Here’s to your healthy digestion!
PART 1
What You Need to Know About Healthy Digestion
Chapter 1
Introducing the Four-Week Plan for Healthy Digestion

The Four-Week Plan for Healthy Digestion that I present in this book is designed to set you on a course that will not only relieve your symptoms now but also stay with you as permanent lifestyle changes to prevent digestion problems in the future. Even if you go “off the wagon” and your symptoms recur, you can always use the plan to realign your lifestyle and eating habits once again, for a lifetime of trouble-free digestion. In this chapter, I outline the plan for you, to give you an idea of what happens during each week. Do not make any changes yet in response to what you read; just begin to think about your own digestion problems. Then, you can go directly to the chapter (or chapters) in which your problems are addressed specifically and put the plan into action. When you are ready, the delicious recipes in Part 2 will help you enjoy trouble-free eating!

The First Week: Start Your Food and Symptom Log

A key part of the Plan for Healthy Digestion is awareness. As you become more conscious of what you eat and drink and of the effects of certain foods and beverages on your body, you begin to acquire the power of knowledge. With knowledge comes the power to change. During the first week, you will begin to collect vital information about your diet and your body that will help you and your doctor discover the best ways to control your symptoms. Your main tool will be your Food and Symptom Log, which is simply a [End of Sample]