

Introduction

The human gut, despite being seen as the somewhat poor relation of the more 'sexy' organs such as the brain and heart, is the hub of good health. Far from being just the 'plumbing' that many people consider it to be, the gut plays numerous vital roles within the body. In fact, good health starts in the gut, because it is here that your inner world (the internal parts of your body) meets the outer world (the food you put into your body). The 'skin' of your digestive tract is wafer thin – a mere one-quarter the thickness of a sheet of paper – but were you to lay it out flat it would cover a surface area of a tennis court (250m²). It is here that all the action happens.

We are frequently told that 'you are what you eat', but contrary to popular belief, you are not. You are what you *can digest and absorb*. Over a lifetime, no less than 100 tonnes of food will pass along the digestive tract, and you'll produce 300,000 litres of digestive juices – 10 litres a day – to break it down. These digestive juices pour into your digestive tract on a mission to break down complex food particles into something simple, such as a sugar, that can be actively transported into your bloodstream and, from there, to all your body's cells.

Amazingly, most of the billions of cells that make up this barrier between your body and the environment are renewed every four days. That is why your digestive system is a hive of activity, only matched by your liver, the central processing organ, and the brain.

Surprising as it may seem, the gut is often considered to be the second brain, because the gut and the brain are in constant communication. Many vital brain-communicating chemicals, such as serotonin, are made in the gut, and this is why having a healthy gut leads to good mental as well as physical health.

Like other animals, we spend our physical lives processing organic matter, extracting nutrients, building materials and fuel, and eliminating the rest. How good we are at this process determines our energy level, longevity, and state of body and mind. A professor at

the Harvard School of Medicine once rightly said, 'A strong stomach and a good set of bowels are more important to human happiness than a large amount of brains.'

Before birth, children are connected to their mothers, and they receive nourishment directly into their bloodstream. At birth the umbilical cord is cut and the digestive system takes over. As we take over our own nourishment we lose that direct maternal dependence, and become totally dependent on external sources of food. Our very survival depends on it.

At one time we depended upon our senses of sight, touch, taste and smell to guide us towards nourishment in the natural world. Nowadays, however, our senses, cleverly manipulated by artificially coloured, flavour-enhanced and sweetened convenience foods, have become our masters. We have, for example, a need for essential fats. In our mouths, accordingly, are fat receptors that respond to the ingestion of essential fats. If, on the other hand, we eat fake fats designed to simulate the texture of fat, the fat receptors are not so strongly stimulated and do not pass on the message of satisfaction. Consequently, we continue to crave fat and continue to choose the wrong kind of fat, causing ourselves many long-term health problems.

Our food, and the urban world we inhabit, has denatured us. We no longer receive the correct bacterial exposure in our over-sanitised world, and, consequently, the fingerprint of our gut bacteria has altered to the point where many people become increasingly intolerant, or even allergic to various foods.

Plants exist to capture energy from the sun and convert it into sugars that feed, via their roots, microorganisms that make up the soil. Modern farming methods destroy the careful balance of the soil, and thus the health of the plants, which we then eat.

Similarly, our food and the bacteria in our guts are like the soil of our system. Our 'roots' are the villi, the protrusions from the gut wall that feed off what we eat. We 'gather' food to feed these bacteria, but modern food is destroying this careful balance between the body and its bacteria, between humans and microorganisms in the gut.

The role of gut bacteria in health has come a long way since I started studying nutrition, and the evidence for their benefit has grown exponentially since I wrote the first version of this book back in 1998. I remember when scientists first identified the ‘human’ strains of bacteria and cultivated them to promote gut health, reported in a damning newspaper article headed ‘Let them eat shit’. Yet, so much scientific evidence now highlights the importance of the right balance of bacteria in the gut, not only for good health but also for weight loss.

Taking in all the nutrients we need at optimal amounts is not only a recipe for a long and healthy physical life, but it also helps us to achieve our full potential as human beings.

Because the body knows when it is receiving everything it requires for its survival, our energy and consciousness can be directed towards fulfilling other needs.

The consequences of sub-optimum nutrition are evident in the increasing incidence of digestive problems and diseases. Every other person, it seems, suffers from bloating, indigestion or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a food intolerance or an allergy. Most are constipated, and colorectal cancer is fast becoming the number-one killer of people under the age of 50.

There is no doubt that many of us are digging our own graves with a knife and fork. No longer is most of society’s suffering the result of poverty. Indeed, much of the Western world’s illness is the consequence of eating too much, rather than too little, and eating the wrong kinds of food.

As a result, there is a quiet epidemic of digestive problems, including indigestion, infections, acid reflux, IBS, stomach bugs, ulcers, Crohn’s disease, colitis and diverticulitis, candidiasis and consequent chronic fatigue.

Whether or not you are currently suffering from any of these ailments, the chances are that you could tune up your digestion and reap rewards in terms of extra health and energy. This book is designed to help you do just that.

Parts I and II explain the digestive system, describing each step along the way, from the beginnings of digesting your food to the act of absorbing nutrients into the body. I explain what goes wrong and how you can adjust your eating to ensure optimal digestion and absorption, which foods to avoid and which to eat more of.

Part III focuses on specific digestive problems – from indigestion to stomach ulcers, and heartburn to IBS and bloating – and the solutions that can help to restore your digestive health. If you have developed a gut infection, be it candida, dysbiosis or a less common gut infection, I'll show you how to restore your gut health. I also focus on inflammatory bowel disorders, from Crohn's to ulcerative colitis.

Part IV puts it all together into an action plan that you can use to clean up your digestion, detoxify your body and experience the consistent energy and clarity of mind that come from optimally nourishing yourself.

Part V gives you delicious digestion-friendly recipes, to help you enjoy the process of becoming, and staying, digestively healthy.

In each chapter you will find simple guidelines for you to follow to improve your digestion. With current testing methods and recent advances in natural treatments, the vast majority of digestive problems can be solved with relative ease, little expense and no need for invasive tests or treatment. The digestive tract is one of the most regenerative parts of the body and, with the most suitable diet, the majority of digestive problems can be swiftly resolved. For those without any apparent digestive problems, following the guidelines in this book may

improve your ability to derive energy from food, thus increasing your vitality and resistance to disease.

I wish you the very best of health,

Patrick Holford

This is an extract from Improve Your Digestion, published on 2nd March 2017. You can order your copy at www.patrickholford.com/books.