An Herbalist’s View of the Digestive System

7Song, Northeast School of Botanical Medicine

Considerations
1. Digestive disorders are one of the most common problems seen by herbalists.
2. Deciding what the root of the problem is important in working with digestive problems.
3. The digestive system is highly innervated with nervous tissue. Because of this, nervous system disorders (such as anxiety) can directly affect the digestive tract.
4. Diarrhea and constipation are symptoms often seen as direct and indirect digestive disorders.
5. Sanitation is key for preventing pathogenic disorders, especially when working with large groups of people or away from sanitary facilities.

Differential diagnosis
1. Differential diagnosis is key to understanding what lies beneath digestive disorders.
2. Is the problem acute or chronic?
3. Is the problem a primary dysfunction of the digestive system, or primarily related to a different body system affecting digestion?
4. Is the problem intrinsic (as with an under-functioning organ) or extrinsic (a pathogen or causative agent)?
5. Is this an exacerbation of a pre-existing conditions or a new health problem?
6. Are drugs (medical or recreational) or other substances involved with the symptoms?
7. What are the triggers affecting the problem? Food intolerances are important considerations.
8. When trying to assess where the problem might lie, consider digestive transit times
   • There is wide variation in individual transit time depending on a person’s patterns and the food ingested
   • Generally food takes 24-72 hours to pass entirely through the body
   • Stomach contents-50% emptied in 2-3 hours with complete emptying in 4-5 hours
   • Small intestine-50% emptying 2.5-3 hours
   • Colon transit-25-40 hours (feces are stored here)

Definitions
1. Amoebic dysentery (Amebiasis)-is an infection caused by the protozoa Entamoeba histolytica. It causes more than 70,000 deaths worldwide each year.
2. Constipation-is having difficulty emptying the bowels. The general rule is less than 3 times per week, but constipation is also determined by individuality.
3. Diarrhea-is a symptom from many causes. It is frequent and excessive evacuation of watery feces.
4. **Dysentery**—inflammation of the intestinal tract often causing severe diarrhea, which may contain mucus or blood. Its origin may be bacterial, protozoal, worms or viral infection.

5. **Escherichia coli (E. coli)**—a common bacteria with some strains causing a number of health disorders including gastroenteritis. One of the more common causes of ‘traveler’s diarrhea’.

6. **Gastroenteritis**—inflammation of the stomach and intestines usually caused by a virus, but sometimes by bacteria or other agents. Main symptoms are diarrhea, cramping and vomiting.

7. **Giardiasis**—is an infection caused by the protozoa *Giardia lamblia*. It affects up to 200,000 people worldwide with wide ranging symptoms which are related to the organisms blocking absorption in the small intestine.

8. **Shigellosis**—is an infection caused by the bacteria *Shigella* (closely related to E. coli). Symptoms tend to be short term.

9. **Viral gastroenteritis**—viruses that cause ‘stomach flu’ often with diarrhea, vomiting and abdominal pain.

### Common Symptoms of Digestive Problems

1. Abdominal pain  
2. Belching  
3. Bloating  
4. Constipation  
5. Diarrhea  
6. Gas  
7. Heartburn  
8. Indigestion (dyspepsia)  
9. Loss of appetite  
10. Malabsorption  
11. Nausea  
12. Stomachaches  
13. Stool with blood or other changes  
14. Vomiting  
15. Weight loss or gain

### Treatment

#### Herbs

1. Black haw  
2. Blackberry root  
3. Calamus  
4. Calendula  
5. Catnip  
6. Chamomile  
7. Chaparro amargosa  
8. Echinacea  
9. Fennel  
10. Garlic  
11. Gentian  
12. Ginger  
13. Goldenseal  
14. Lobelia  
15. Marshmallow  
16. Oak  
17. Oregon graperoot  
18. Peppermint  
19. Senna  
20. Silk tassel  
21. Skullcap  
22. Slippery elm  
23. Spearmint  
24. Turkey rhubarb  
25. Turmeric  
26. Wild yam  
27. Yarrow  
28. Yerba mansa

#### Formulas

1. Peppermint spirits  
2. Neutralizing cordial  
3. Bitter tonic  
4. Antispasmodic compound
Non-Herbal Medicines
1. Activated charcoal
2. Clay
3. Honey

Categories of Therapeutics
1. Adsorbents
2. Anodynes
3. Antimicrobials
4. Antinauseants
5. Antiparasiticals
6. Antispasmodics
7. Astringents
8. Bitters
9. Carrier/Flavoring
10. Digestive Nervines
11. Pain Remedies
12. Restoratives

Antimicrobials - inhibit or kill viruses and bacteria
- Calamus
- Calendula
- Chaparral
- Yarrow
- Echinacea
- Garlic
- Goldenseal
- Licorice
- Oregon graperooot
- Osha

Antiparasiticals - kill larger parasitic organisms such as protozoa and worms
- Activated charcoal
- Bitters
- Black walnut
- Chaparro amargosa
- Cloves
- Garlic
- Pumpkin seeds
- Wormwood

Antispasmodics - relax smooth muscle spasms
- Black haw
- Crampbark
- Marijuana
- Neutralizing cordial
- Silk tassel
- Valerian
- Wild yam

Astringents - tighten gut tissue
- Agrimonia
- Blackberry root
- Geranium
- Oak
- Polygonum bistorta
- Potentilla
- Rhatany
- Rose
- ‘Tea’
- Witch hazel
- Yellow dock
- Yerba mansa

Bitters - stimulate gastrointestinal secretions
- Artemisia
- Bogbean
- Chaparro amargosa
- Chicory
- Dandelion
- Gentian
- Goldenseal
- Vervain

Carrier/Flavoring - to help palatability
- Anise
- Cardamom
- Cayenne
- Cinnamon
- Fennel
- Ginger
- Slippery elm
Digestive Nervines-specific gut nerve soothing remedies
- California poppy
- Catnip
- German chamomile
- Peppermint
- Meadowsweet
- Peppermint spirits
- Vervain

Pain Remedies-for a variety of gut and gut-associated pains
- Aloe
- Skullcap
- Valerian
- Catnip
- Fennel
- Chamomile
- Ginger
- Jamaican dogwood
- Kava kava
- Licorice
- Lobelia
- Meadowsweet
- Peppermint
- Silk tassel
- Skullcap
- Valerian
- Wild yam

Restoratives-to help restore gut health after sickness
- Catnip
- Comfrey
- Fennel
- Nettles
- Marshmallow
- Oatmeal
- Peppermint
- Slippery elm
- Miso
- Yogurt-live
- Zingiber