

An Herbalist's View of the Digestive System

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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

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

Treatment

Herbs

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

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

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

Antimicrobials- inhibit or kill viruses and bacteria

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|-------------|--------------|---------------------|
| • Calamus | • Echinacea | • Licorice |
| • Calendula | • Garlic | • Oregon grape root |
| • Chaparral | • Goldenseal | • Osha |
| • Yarrow | | |

Antiparasitics-kill larger parasitic organisms such as protozoa and worms

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|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| • Activated charcoal | • Chaparro amargosa | • Pumpkin seeds |
| • Bitters | • Cloves | • Wormwood |
| • Black walnut | • Garlic | |

Antispasmodics-relax smooth muscle spasms

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|--------------|------------------------|------------|
| • Black haw | • Neutralizing cordial | • Wild yam |
| • Cramp bark | • Silk tassel | |
| • Marijuana | • Valerian | |

Astringents-tighten gut tissue

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|-------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| • Agrimonia | • Polygonum bistorta | • 'Tea' |
| • Blackberry root | • Potentilla | • Witch hazel |
| • Geranium | • Rhatany | • Yellow dock |
| • Oak | • Rose | • Yerba mansa |

Bitters-stimulate gastrointestinal secretions

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| • Artemisia | • Chicory | • Goldenseal |
| • Bogbean | • Dandelion | • Vervain |
| • Chaparro amargosa | • Gentian | |

Carrier/Flavoring-to help palatability

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|------------|------------|----------------|
| • Anise | • Cinnamon | • Slippery elm |
| • Cardamom | • Fennel | |
| • Cayenne | • Ginger | |

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