

Yogic management of Digestive Disorders



I chose this topic because it is very personal to me. For most of my life I had a good relationship with food, a good appetite and I enjoyed to try different things. Luckily in my life I have always preferred 'healthy' food, and have never really enjoyed sugary sweets, fizzy drinks or junk food.

A few years ago, I started to react differently to food. After travelling for a long time and being away from a kitchen my relationship with food changed. My emotions started to deeply affect my appetite and I would not be able to eat, and if I tried to eat I would literally be in agony and experience nausea after eating. Of course, this had an affect on my body and every time I experienced some emotional disturbances I would lose weight dramatically.

The affects of my relationship to food started to have stronger affects, and around 4 years ago I started to develop food allergies. The first that I noticed was an allergy to milk, then to eggs and during this time I also developed a lot 'sensitivities' to other food like lentils, and some vegetables. When I would eat these foods I would become bloated and heavy in my stomach, experiencing a build up of gas and mucus and a dip in energy. So I became a Vegan.

To begin with I was happy to be vegan, it suited my lifestyle. My body felt light and energized and I was happy to step out of the moral complications involving animal products. I was eating a healthy diet and living an active lifestyle. The past couple of years my life became very busy, and I was not eating so much (still healthy, but very little), not sleeping so much and using all of my energy and becoming exhausted. After many months like this, my energy was basically non-existent, I would do all I could in the day and then collapse into bed in the night, and drag myself out in the

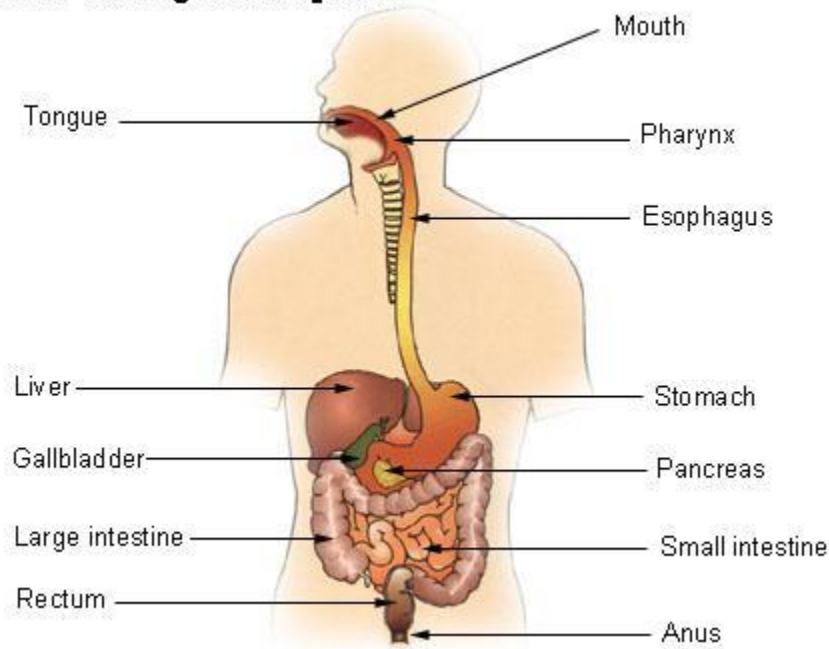
morning. My yoga practice suffered. I was losing strength through over exertion and not nourishing myself with a suitable diet. I did not know at the time but my vegan diet was not supporting my body. I 'burned' all of the stored vitamins and minerals stored in my body and was not replacing them. I was becoming malnourished. Last year I was also diagnosed with a wheat intolerance. There was so little that I could eat my body was suffering. It was then that I became sick, my liver and kidneys were not able to function properly and my digestion was very weak.

It was at this point that I realized I had to properly engage my relationship to food, and start to heal my body. So since this is a very personal subject to me, I choose to change the name, not 'Digestive Disorders,' but 'My Digestive Challenge.'

The Science Part- The Digestive System

So lets begin by looking at the digestive system:

Organs of the Digestive System



Digestion begins in the mind; the sight, smell or even just the thought of food can trigger saliva formation. The body thus begins to prepare to eat.

- **The Mouth:** Food first enters our bodies through the mouth. Here we chew the food to break it into smaller pieces. The tongue pushes the food to the teeth where the food is broken down and saliva helps to break down the food even more and make it

into a kind of paste that is easier to swallow. The food has a short journey down the esophagus and enters...

- **The Stomach:** The stomach initially stores the food as it is being eaten and then continues the digestive process. The strong muscles of the stomach wall and the digestive juices break down the food into a more 'liquidy' mixture and slowly release it into the....
 - **The Small Intestine:** The small intestine is on average 6.7m long and 3.5cm around. It folded into the body under the stomach. Here the food is broken down into vitamins/minerals/carbohydrates, fats and proteins and is gradually absorbed into the blood to nourish the body. The Pancreas helps this process by making juices that help the body to absorb proteins and fats. The Liver creates bile that helps fats be absorbed into the blood stream and the Gall Bladder stores the bile for use as it is needed. This process can take around 4 hours (depending on what has been eaten). After the body has absorbed everything it can the leftover 'food waste' passes to the...
 - **The Large Intestine:** The large intestine is on average 1.5 metres long and between 7 and 10cm around. The part of the large intestine called the Colon takes out all the remaining water and some minerals and the mixtures becomes solid waste- poop! The journey of food through the body ends when the solid waste (poop) passes out of the body through the...
 - **The Rectum:** and then finally...
 - **The Anus:** last stop of the digestion process!
- ❖ The Liver has an extra role in the absorption of food. Once the small intestine has absorbed the vitamins and minerals into the blood, the nutrient rich blood passes to the liver where it is filtered of toxins and then sent to the relevant parts of the body. The liver is also a storehouse for some vitamins. Once the liver has filtered out the toxins it releases them into the large intestine for elimination from the body.

The Problem:

The digestive process is complex and requires a healthy relationship between all of the organs involved to complete the procedure. A disfunction in any organ will affect the whole digestive system and therefore the health of the body.

Food Allergy:

The most common food allergies are

- Milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Soy
- Wheat

- Tree nuts (walnuts/cashews)
- Fish
- Shellfish

An allergic reaction to food occurs because the immune system of the body reacts incorrectly to the food that has been ingested. It registers the food as a threat to the body and releases histamine to cope. Unfortunately this causes allergic reactions and can affect the eyes/nose/throat/lungs/skin and gastro-intestinal tract.

- Skin reactions: itchy, red bumpy rashes (hives), eczema, redness and swelling around mouth/face
- Respiratory system: Runny/stuffy nose, itching, sneezing, coughing and wheezing.
- Gastro-Intestinal System: Belly cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation.
- Cardiovascular System: Feeling of faintness and light headed.

The symptoms that I experience during an allergic reaction vary, but generally involve

- Headache
- Mucus formation in the nose, throat and intestines
- Gas
- Constipation/ diarrhea
- Bloating
- Dizziness
- Loss of energy

When I ingest food that my body has a reaction to my immune system 'attacks' the food. The biggest reaction that my body experiences during an allergic reaction is the over production of mucus in my intestine. When my body meets something that it cannot digest it coats the food fragments in mucus to protect the itself against what it believes is harmful. This leads to the intestine being overloaded with mucus and once this has happened the absorption and elimination of food becomes difficult. Also the mucus lining my intestine blocks the pipes that the liver uses to release toxins. My body begins to suffer due to malnutrition from malabsorption and toxin overload. This leads to heaviness and loss of energy and can develop into depression and loss of motivation.

Which treatment to take?

Western medicine has very little to offer regarding digestive disorders. Most of the treatment would involve taking medication to suppress the symptoms which does nothing for the actual cause. Western medicine practitioners tend to focus on sickness, and not on health.

How Yoga can help

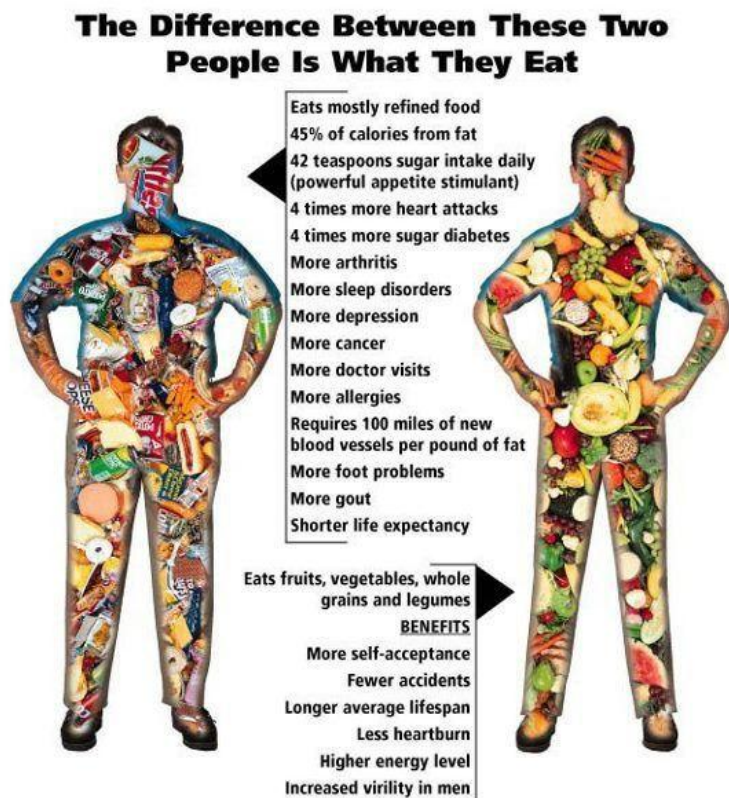
Yoga offers a holistic approach to healing and offers many methods to bring the body back to a balanced state of health. This means not only treating the sickness in the physical body, but also in the energetic and mental bodies. Disease passes through all the bodies and needs to be treated accordingly. In much the same way, any 'disease' of mental or energetic bodies will affect the physical body.

- Annamaya Kosha: material body, 'the food sheath.' The physical body is best treated with diet, asana and kriya

- Pranamaya Kosha: 'the vital sheath.' The energetic body is best treated with pranayama, mudra and chakra investigation/healing.
- Manomaya Kosha: 'the mental sheath.' The mental body is best treated with stress management and positive affirmation.

Diet:

'You are what you eat.' Every 35 days, your skin replaces itself, your liver in about 5 months, your bones in 10 years. Your body creates new cells from the food you eat. What you eat literally becomes you, and you have choices in what you are made of.



You Can Eat Your Way To a Healthier Life

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'Let food be your medicine, and your medicine your food.' Hippocrates

'To keep the body in a state of health and high vital resistance it is important to take only the right foods, in the right quantities and at the right times. Most diseases (not only digestive disorders), directly or indirectly come from not having learnt to eat correctly. From the point of view of physical health, whenever we use the eating mechanism for other purposes, such as the satisfaction of emotional needs, to relieve frustration, as an outlet for greed etc. we are using it wrongly and have

commenced to travel the road of sickness, disease and physical decay.’ Yogic Management of Common Diseases,’ Dr Swami Karmananda, Bihar book

Basic Ayurvedic and Yogic approaches to food

Ayurveda has developed a system to categorize the different body types. Discovering your own body type is essential for a healthy body. Once you understand the details of your particular body type it is possible to develop the correct diet and lifestyle that best suits you.

The Ayurvedic Dosas

- Vata- The principle of motion- ‘that which moves.’
- Pitta- The principle of transformation- ‘that which digests.’
- Kapha- The principle of stability- ‘that which holds together.’

Each person is a combination of the elements, earth, water, fire, air and ether. Combinations of the elements create the ayurvedic ‘dosas.’ A combination of ether and air join to make Vata. A combination of fire and water create Pitta and a combination of water and earth create Kapha. Each person is a combination of the dosas, usually with one pre-dominant dosa that ‘rules’ their personality and body type.

Ayurvedic treatment focuses on making sure the dosas in a person are in balance, as a doshic imbalance can create weakness in the body (including the energetic and mental bodies!).

The Yoga Gunas

- Sattva- balance and harmony
- Rajas- activity (that can lead to hyper activity)
- Tamas- inertia

Yoga has a very similar theory to Ayurveda and categorizes energies, behaviours and foods into the ‘gunas.’

- **Sattvic food** is food that increase life, purity, strength, health, joy and are generally savoury, substantial and agreeable. i.e- fresh and simple, foods that supply energy.

- **Rajasic food** is food that are bitter, sour, saline, excessively hot, pungent, dry and burning. i.e complex, cooked food, foods that can over stimulate.
- **Tamasic food** is food that is stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten and impure. i.e processed food lacking in nutrients, foods that can create anger/impure thoughts.

Each person has a body that is entirely unique, and there is no one rule to eating that will fit everyone. Once a person has discovered their body types and its associated strengths and weaknesses, balances and imbalances then it is possible to construct a diet, exercise and lifestyle plan.

- ❖ To heal the body a person must develop an awareness of the food they eat. In today's world most people eat a highly complex diet and very often are not aware which foods they are putting in their body. Eating out and eating 'ready made' food can cause us to ingest many things that we are unaware of. Since developing my food allergies unless I make my own food, I have to check everything I eat to find the ingredients.

Chemical pesticides, insecticides, cleaners and preservatives and artificial flavours are present in many of the foods we eat. It is also important to understand that a lot of the food we eat does not have the same nutrition that it used to have because the land has been over farmed and the soil has become deficient of minerals. With this in mind it is important to find the right supplements to support your diet and your bodily health. And try to buy organic fresh food to avoid chemicals and preservatives!

The Manipura Chakra

Another important aspect to healing the body is to recognize the energy centres of the body and their functions. The yoga tradition recognizes 7 major energy centres in the body and calls them 'chakras.' The four lower chakras each represent the action of an element in the body. The Anahata chakra, or heart chakra is the energy of air in the body. It is said that the air element in the heart is the bellows that blows the fire element in the Manipura chakra in the solar plexus. Swadhisthana chakra, or navel chakra is the energy of water in the body and governs the elimination of liquid wastes in the body and Mooladhara chakra is the grounded earth of the body and takes out waste from the body. Each chakra connects to different organs and functions of the body. The chakra connected to the digestive system is the Manipura chakra. The chakras can become blocked and hold negative energy in the body so it is important to identify the characteristics of each particular chakra to keep energy flowing correctly.

Some facts about the Manipura chakra

- Governs the stomach, liver, pancreas, intestines, blood sugar and the digestive system.

- It connects to the mental realms and the thinking self. Optimism, intelligence and creativity and frustration, anger.
- Emotions of the Manipura chakra: anger, zeal, courage, confidence and frustration, joy, cheerfulness and spontaneity. Gut feelings and intuitions
- An imbalance of the Manipura chakra can manifest as depression, frustration, isolation, doubt lethargy and anger. An inability to work hard, procrastination, apathy, loss of self respect and can lead to being controlled by others.

Clearing the Manipura chakra:

- Spend time in the sun
- Exercise
- Finish incomplete tasks
- Make an effort in personal appearance
- Set a goal and achieve it
- Be assertive
- The colour corresponding to the Manipura chakra is yellow, so wearing yellow and being in a 'yellow environment' (ie, yellow room) can be beneficial.
- The mantra for the Manipura chakra is Ram. Repeating this aloud or internally during meditation brings a healing vibration to the area.
- Crystals connecting the Manipura chakra are citrine, amber, tigers eye and yellow topaz.

Taking time to clear the chakras and encourage their good functioning is very beneficial for the energy body and therefore the physical and mental bodies also.

Yogic Practices for the benefit of a healthy digestive system

Kriyas- cleansing techniques

Early yoga practitioners recognized the importance of the healthy digestive system and also developed methods to cleanse the digestive tracts when necessary.

- Uddiyana Bandha- vigorous contraction of the abdominal muscles. This strengthens and rejuvenates the nerves of the digestive system and helps to release toxins from the digestive tract.
- Agnisara- Similar to Uddiyana Bandha but with a vigorous pumping of the abdominal wall. The benefits are the same as Uddiyana bandha although the affects are stronger.
- Nauli- Isolated contraction and rolling manipulation of the abdominal muscles. The benefits of Nauli are basically the same as above, but as greater control and awareness are needed the affects can be even more beneficial.
- Vamana Dhouti- The practice of drinking 1.5 litres of salt water as quickly as possible and then vomiting it out. This practice deeply cleanses the stomach of all of its contents and promotes proper functioning of the stomach.
- Shankhapraksalana- The practice of drinking around 2 litres of salt water and through a combination of exercises moving the salt water through the whole digestive system for a complete cleanse.

All of the kriyas greatly help to de-toxify the body. The practices help with the elimination of toxins and free radicals that may be floating in the blood stream and with fewer toxins, the body will be able to reach optimum health.

- ❖ When dealing with an allergic reaction it is likely that there will be mucus congestion in the nasal area. For cleansing of the sinus and nasal cavity I would recommend Jala Neti cleansing. Jala Neti cleansing involves pouring salt water through the nasal passages and cleanses the area of congested mucus and can remove cold, hypersensitivity and headache.

Pranayama:

Prana can be understood as the life-force, the energy that flows in the body and makes it alive, and Ayama can be understood as control. So pranayama practices aim to control the flow of energy in the body. Pranayama practices increase the life force and also purifies the physical, energetic and mental bodies.

With the focus of the digestion is important to identify the affects of different pranayama techniques. If a person has a low digestive fire, the focus should be on heating pranayamas, and if a person has too much digestive fire cooling pranayamas would be more beneficial.

- Natural breathing calms the mind and raises awareness
- Abdominal breathing massages the liver/stomach and intestines
- Full yogic breathing is very good for managing stress and bringing awareness to the body.
- Nadi Shudi has a calming affect and balances all the systems of the body.

Heating pranayamas

- Kapalabhati- highly energizing and tones the digestive organs, reduces constipation and indigestion
- Suryabedana- creates heat in the body but can cause weight loss.
- Ujjayi- warms the body and bring focus
- Bastrika- burns toxins and strengthens the abdominal muscles and organs

Cooling pranayamas

- Shitali- calming and cooling and soothes thirst and hunger
- Shitkari- same as above

Yoga Asana

Asana Yoga is very beneficial for the digestive system. In any general practice the practice of asana massages and stimulates all of the internal organs. Forwarded bending, back bending, twisting, standing and inversions all have a good affect on the digestive system.

Beginners sequence:

The therapy series:

Joint movements

Standing breathing with emphasis on the parivrtta trikonasana stretching

Back movements with emphasis on bujangasana, shalabasana and dhanurasana breathing

Supine practice

Suryanamaskar

Savasana

Outside of a yoga practice I would recommend the student to practice Vajrasana or Virasana for 5 to 10 minutes after eating as this greatly improves the digestion.

Intermediate sequence:

Surya namaskar

Utkatasana- activates kidneys, good for toxin elimination

Ardha Kati Chakrasana- massages abdominal organs

Trikonasana Classisical- massages liver/spleen/pancreas/kidneys/intestines

Trikonasana Variation- as above

Parivrtta Trikonasana- as above

Bhujangasana

Shalabasana

Ustrasana- activates abdominal organs

Supta Virasana- helps digestion

Paschimottanasana- activates abdominal organs

Ardha Padmasana- massages abdominal organs

Marichasana A- strong work on abdominal organs

Bharadvajasna- activates abdominal organs

Ardha Matsyendrasana

Savasana

Yoga greatly improves a persons connection between the physical body, mind and breath, and greatly improves awareness on all three. Activating the body's inherent healing energy is a fundamental principle of Yogic management. If genuine health is desired it is important to treat a person holistically and not to focus only on the body. Creating understanding, awareness and responsibility for a persons body puts us on the road to health, and a health that exists not only in the physical body but also on mental and energetic levels. This in turn will hopefully lead a person to a more balanced and aware existence and a more fulfilled life.