

Solving the problems of digestion and chronic illness:

It's Elementary, My Dear Watson!

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This fall, PBS peddled out a hot new program guaranteed to raise a lot of money for the network. It also raised a lot of delicate, if discerning eyebrows.

The digestive system – in particular its grisly inner workings and unsavory end product – is not normally the subject of polite conversation. Yet PBS threw caution to the wind and broadcast this unappetizing new reality show anyway.

The network's official website offers the following explanation.

"More than 65 million have chronic heartburn and over 58 million have irritable bowel syn-

drome," PBS explains. "In many cases, these digestive disorders could be avoided or modified with a proper understanding of nutrition, digestion, elimination and stress modification." Stress Modification?

While that last term may border on psychobabble, a common-sense approach to understanding the digestive system and its connection to disease is long overdue. Oprah fired the opening salvo with two shows this year devoted to the fascinating and, likewise, much neglected subject of poop. Now PBS enters the fray with its own two-hour look at constipation, diarrhea and all sorts of other nasty business associated with human biology.

The program, which began airing in October, features an articulate southern redhead spouting a simple solution to what has become a national epidemic.

Brenda Watson, N.D. (meaning she's a naturopath) is the author of several books on how to recover from chronic illness using a few basic dietary recommendations.

If that sounds like something you've heard before, it isn't. Previous explanations for what causes diarrhea, makes a stomach bloat, jumpstarts a migraine, or triggers a myriad of other complications have been sketchy at best. At worst, they are routinely laced with medical terminology and advocate the use of expensive drug medications.

Brenda Watson, N.D. knows how to spell relief.

The founder of five natural health clinics, Watson thinks ingesting pills may only exacerbate a digestive malady. She brings a much-needed layman's version to this rather sticky subject in the form of a lecture videotaped before a studio audience. In the space of about two hours, she lays out the process of digestion in almost self-explanatory terms, connects the dots between common eating habits and disease, and outlines a few effortless steps that may utterly turn a patient's life around from one meal to the next.

Odd thing is, Watson doesn't peddle any particular patent remedy or cure beyond using your own noggin. There's no book or magazine subscription to purchase. You don't even need to visit a nutritionist or naturopath unless your health requires it. To the contrary, by adding and subtracting a few specific items to your daily menu, you may be able to squeak by without having to resort to costly medication and labor-intensive therapies like colon cleansing.

In addition, Watson argues that long-term reliance on drug regimens may cripple the digestive tract, weaken the organs, and pave the way for health emergencies that may be even worse than the original complaint.

Her small, eight-page brochure (available online or at health food stores) notes that the skyrocketing incidence of chronic disease in the United States



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likely has its origins in the gut. A combination of over-the-counter heartburn medication and an unbalanced diet may be enough to compromise the immune system by throwing your digestive tract out of kilter.

Since 70 percent of your immune system resides in this part of your body, toxins from undigested food can get absorbed in the bloodstream. Illnesses like arthritis, diabetes, cancer and heart disease may eventually settle in.

In particular, she says the consumption of too much processed food and not enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains has hindered the American digestive system to the point of collapse. A lack of enzymes needed to break down the ingested material into nutrients also contributes to the problem.

That's why a downward spiral can be turned around early by making adjustments to your diet. Watson has helped patients regain control of their health by simply altering the proportions of what they eat and by adding a few essential items commonly lacking. Called the H.O.P.E. formula, the acronym stands for High fiber, Oils, Probiotics and Enzymes. According to Watson, these four ingredients can facilitate permanent recovery for many Americans plagued by chronic illness and digestive troubles.

Here's a brief summary of how each figures into the picture:

Fiber

Found in raw foods and whole grains, fiber pushes undigested food through your intestines. Like the bristled brush of a street-sweeper, fiber prevents toxins from the insoluble material from seeping into your bloodstream

by clearing them out of the colon naturally.

Fiber also feeds probiotics, the healthy bacteria in your gut.

These living cells multiply and combat the unhealthy bacteria, which in turn boosts your immune system.

A diet that includes fruits and vegetables (uncooked or lightly steamed), as well as whole grains (especially sprouted grains) can provide you with all the fiber you need. However, nutritionists say most Americans consume less than half the daily recommendation of 25 to 35 grams.

If your doctor suggests a fiber supplement, be sure to get something that's formulated with 75 percent insoluble fiber and 25 percent soluble. Watson and her staff recommend a flax-based fiber supplement, since this compound most closely mimics the three-to-one ratio found in fruits and veggies.

Omega-3

Most diets will tell you to avoid fats. However, research in recent years has rebutted this rule of thumb. Certain kinds of fatty acids, called polyunsaturated fats, turn out to be not only healthy, but essential to preventing heart disease.

(Saturated fats, which have been in the news lately, are the bad fats commonly found in hydrogenated oils. These should be avoided.)

In her lecture, Watson says Eskimos routinely ingest 12 or 13 grams of polyunsaturated fat a day and have almost no incidence of heart disease. The World Health Organization has recently issued a recommendation that everyone consume at least two grams of Omega-3 oils per day.

Omega-3 represents the essential fatty acid in which most Americans are deficient. Along with Omega-6 and Omega-9, Omega-3 nourishes the brain, eyes and kidneys, and supports the immune system. They are also helpful in regulating optimum hormonal balance and the metabolism.

Omega-3 oils are found in wild salmon and cold-water fish, such as halibut, tuna, sardines, herring and mackerel. Unfortunately, the high levels of mercury found in many aquatic species have prompted a cautionary note in recent years. As a result, fish should be eaten in moderation. Plant sources of Omega-3's include walnuts, flaxseed and dark leafy vegetables. Organic milk also contains some Omega-3.

If necessary, you can supplement these food sources with fish-based Omega-3 supplements that have undergone purification to remove detectable levels of mercury, PCB's and other contaminants. (Make sure to read the bottle before purchasing.) The supplement should also contain Lipase, an enzyme that helps your body break down and absorb the Omega-3's.

Probiotics

According to Dr. Watson's brochure, "Probiotics are the beneficial bacteria that live in your digestive tract." The two most prevalent are Lactobacillus and Bifidobacteria.

You may have heard the names before, as both are listed as ingredients in yogurt. Sometimes referred to as "live cultures", Bifidobacteria tends to take up residence in your large intestine, while Lactobacillus settles into the small intestine after being

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ingested. Both feed on fiber and multiply, enabling them to fend off onslaughts from toxins and unhealthy bacteria that cause illness and disease.

Like fiber, probiotics help you form healthy stools on a regular basis. The colon, incidentally, is that major portion of the large intestine that extracts water from the feces and moves it down into the rectum. A balance of 80 percent good bacteria to 20 percent bad bacteria is considered healthy.

Signs of bacterial disharmony may come in the form of diarrhea, constipation, excessive gas or bloating, vaginal yeast infections, lactose intolerance, complex carbohydrate intolerance or skin disruptions.

(If you have recently taken a course of anti-biotics, it's possible that the medication has killed off lots of your good bacteria, causing your garden-variety yeast infection.)

Foods rich in probiotics include yogurt and other fermented dairy products (e.g. kefir), sauerkraut, tempeh and miso. Supplements are also widely available, but Watson says many of them are low in Bifidobacteria. She also recommends a "delivery mechanism" for the probiotic that is either enteric-coated or in the form of a Bio-Tract tablet. That insures that the bacteria remain intact until they reach their destination along the digestive tract.

She suggests an average daily intake of 6-15 billion live cultures per day for adults, and 30-50 billion live cultures for those aged 50 or older.

How one goes about counting the live cultures in yogurt and tempeh is not clear.

Enzymes

"Enzymes are proteins that catalyze chemical reactions," ac-

ording to Wikipedia. Present in uncooked foods, they play a key role in the absorption of nutrients into the bloodstream.

Your body also manufactures its own enzymes to help with absorption. Chewing food thoroughly and saturating it with saliva starts the process of digestion even before the material reaches the stomach.

Unfortunately, natural enzymes are depleted when food is heated or processed before being served. That's why the age-old convention of accompanying a dinner entree with a green salad is still considered sound policy. If you experience heartburn, bloating, gas or fatigue after eating, it may well be the result of insufficient enzymes.

Overeating may also be a factor.

As in the case of the three other items in the H.O.P.E. Formula, you can take supplements to build up your enzyme arsenal. However, because of the wide array of foods we eat, several different enzymes are needed, including lactase for dairy products and protease for meat and other proteins.

Dr. Watson recommends a plant-based enzyme supplement, since it's "activated" as soon as it's swallowed and provides the proper pH range for absorption.

Road to Recovery

For those suffering from chronic illness, Doctor Watson's dietary suggestions are, of course, just that – suggestions. They're not meant to furnish a one-size-fits-all magic bullet but rather offer a solid foundation to build on in order to regain any lost measure of health.

She also notes in her brochure that the FDA has not approved the H.O.P.E. Formula and that her rec-

ommendations should not be used as a substitute for medical advice from a licensed practitioner.

Changes in lifestyle, removal of stress triggers, regular exercise and an active social life offer other avenues of recovery. Taken together, these self-help measures can help "catalyze" your body's own chemistry to do what nature intended – to preserve good health and ward off illness.

For more information or to download a copy of Dr. Watson's brochure, visit Hopeformula.com or BrendaWatson.com. If you're looking for a nutrition specialist, check naturopathic.org for listings of N.D.'s in the San Francisco area.

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