

Facts and Fallacies about Digestive Diseases

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Modern science has only recently begun to understand the complexity of our digestive system and how its functioning impacts on our general well-being. Gradually “old wives” tales, folklore and myths about the cause and treatment of digestive diseases is being replaced by accurate and scientifically sound knowledge. Nevertheless many misconceptions still exist.

Spicy food, fizzy drinks and stress cause stomach ulcers. FALSE

The vast majority of stomach ulcers are caused by either an infection in the stomach or by drugs such as aspirin or anti-inflammatories. In 1981 two Australian doctors identified the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* which is capable of surviving in the acidic environment of the stomach. Furthermore their research showed that this bug causes stomach and duodenal ulcers. In 2005 they were both awarded a Nobel Prize for this remarkable discovery. Treatment of this infection can cure an ulcer and prevent it from returning.

A bowel movement every day is essential for good health. FALSE

The frequency of bowel movements in normal healthy people is variable. For some a bowel movement once every three days may be just fine, whereas for others, three times a day may be normal.

“Cleaning out” my colon with a colonic washout will improve my health. FALSE

Our digestive system has been well designed to take care of all necessary maintenance. The digestive tract produces adequate liquid (litres a day) to keep the system flushed, the entire cell lining of the digestive tract is replaced every five days and the muscles in the intestines propels undigested food and wastes out the system. Furthermore millions of scavenging bacteria keep our colons healthy. Our clumsy attempts to keep our digestive system “clean” with enemas and washouts can result in a colon perforation and an operation would be required to repair the damage.

“Leaky gut” is responsible for a number of gastrointestinal symptoms. FALSE

This is a common misconception peddled by alternative health practitioners. Our gastrointestinal tract is by design selectively leaky. This allows the passage of water and nutrients through our intestinal lining allowing their absorption. It also allows the movements of digestive juices, lubricating mucus and other essential products required for digestion into the digestive tract. However it also acts as a barrier preventing the billions of bacteria in our intestines from entering our body. If this was allowed to occur we would be overwhelmed by infection and die. In certain serious illnesses for example, tuberculosis of the intestines and severe inflammatory bowel disease the lining of the intestine can become damaged and as a result “excessively leaky”. This causes severe diarrhoea often with bleeding, loss of weight and vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Fortunately this is rare. The vast majority of people labelled with “leaky gut” have normal intestines.

A “Candida diet” is advisable to clear this yeast from the digestive system. FALSE

Candida albicans is a yeast found in every healthy person and is identified in the stool if submitted for analysis. Candida has been linked to a wide range of ailments but there is no scientific evidence to support this. Candida diets consist of avoiding yeast based products such as bread, wine or beer or “starving” the Candida by avoiding dairy and sugar. Firstly food products containing yeast do not use Candida but another type of yeast called *Saccharomyces* so avoiding bread, wine or beer will not have an impact on the amount of Candida ingested. Secondly Candida is unable to ferment lactose the carbohydrate found in dairy so avoiding dairy will have no impact on Candida. Most carbohydrates will be broken down to glucose so avoiding sugar makes no sense in “treating Candida”, one would have to avoid all carbohydrates which is not possible. In certain conditions associated with suppression of the

immune system such as HIV, diabetes or patients on steroid treatment Candida can become a problem and cause illness.

A wheat-free diet is essential for good health. FALSE

This is a very common misconception. A gluten free diet is difficult to follow, results in the exclusion of important nutritious foods and may only benefit the local health store owner. However increasingly people are being identified with a condition called Coeliac disease. This disease is caused by a combination of gluten in the diet and a susceptible genetic make-up, usually found in people of European descent. In these susceptible individuals gluten causes damage to the lining of the intestine which is reversible if gluten is omitted from the diet. Interestingly Coeliac disease was first recognized by a Dutch doctor during the Second World War. He noticed that children who were ill before the war seemed to thrive when wheat was no longer available during the war. The condition is diagnosed by a combination of blood tests and a biopsy of the small intestine taken during a gastroscopy. If Coeliac disease is confirmed then a strict gluten free diet will be advised. Starting a strict gluten free diet before having the diagnosis confirmed by a gastroenterologist is not advisable. My advice is the following: if bread, pasta or pizza does not agree with you avoid eating them. A strict gluten free diet however should be reserved for people with confirmed Coeliac disease.

Natural medicines are far safer than prescription medications. FALSE

Alternative health practitioners play an important role in the management of a variety of conditions. Certain digestive diseases, for example IBS, may improve with acupuncture, massage therapy or homeopathic treatments. However not all natural treatments are safe. Many well-known drugs are derived from natural products. Aspirin comes from the bark of the Willow tree, digoxin (heart drug) from the Foxglove flower, chemotherapy drugs from certain moulds etc. Therefore natural medicines may be as harmful as prescription drugs. Well described complications of natural medicines include hepatitis, liver failure or interaction with prescription medication causing harmful side effects. Furthermore a gastroenterologist prescribing drugs for your digestive disease has a minimum of 13 years training. The standard of training and expertise amongst alternative health practitioners varies from attending a course for a few weeks to extensive training at a reputable institution.

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