

The Digestive System. A long, winding road from A to B!

We've looked at Reflexology and the Nervous, Endocrine, Respiratory, and Cardiovascular Systems. Now, it's time for the Digestive System.

The Digestive System has more organs than any other, yet it's focused on one job: to get your cells the nutrients they need to carry out their different functions.

I think we've all encountered a loss of appetite, constipation or diarrhea due to travel, public speaking, or any activity which pushes us from our comfort zone. Adding other forms of stress, sleepless nights, or a headache (one side-affect of constipation) to the mix, only compounds digestive system health issues.

The Digestive System consists of the mouth, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, and rectum.

Digestion begins before food enters our mouths. When we smell or see food that appeals to us, it stimulates the secretion of saliva. Salivary enzymes help breakdown starch.

Once chewed, food is swallowed through the esophagus. Using a peristaltic motion, muscles contract and move the food to the stomach.

The stomach, a mucosal lined sac, secretes a strong acid which starts the breakdown of protein in our food. It's also an important chemical barrier against germs and organisms. The stomach is mostly concerned with changing the food by continuing to break it apart before moving to the small intestine. **Stress can contribute to different types of ulcers affecting the digestive system: mouth, esophageal, peptic (stomach & upper small intestine), and, the ulcers themselves, often cause additional stress.**

The liver has over 600 known functions, but one of its major functions is to manufacture bile and to store sugar.

The liver constantly secretes bile (a grease-cutting detergent and emulsifier) like a slow drip, which is stored in the gall bladder. When food comes into the stomach, the gallbladder is alerted through a chemical messenger -- a hormone (Endocrine system), and bile comes down the common bile duct onto the fatty food to help break it down. The pancreas, a dual-function organ, is alerted when food is in the stomach. It produces a digestive enzyme called pancreatin that breaks down almost everything: protein, carbohydrate, and fat.

If everything works properly, enzymes are released and the mix, called chyme, goes through the **small intestine – roughly 18-20 feet long**.

We tend to think of digestion as something the stomach does, but really, it happens in the small intestine. It is here food molecules are broken down into their individual

components; proteins to amino acids, fats into fatty acid molecules and carbohydrates into glucose molecules.

Once food is broken down into small enough molecules, these have to get to the cells that need them. The absorptive surface of the small intestine is where the nutrients are pulled by the villi in the small intestine and enter the blood stream.

After a while in the small intestine food is moved via peristalsis to the ileocecal valve and appendix.

This is the junction of the small and the large intestine. The ileocecal valve is like a ring valve and functions to prevent backflow. From this point, food is slated for elimination – no longer digestion. Water is absorbed, and the waste is concentrated. The appendix whose function wasn't known until recently, helps to prevent mucous production in the intestines and is also immune tissue. The appendix has an immune function.

At this point the food residue travels through the large intestine reaching the rectum and anus. These are valves. They are given messages as to when it's time to eliminate.

The major function of the digestive system is to extract the energy value and nutrition from food. **Whenever possible, it's important to eat regular, nutritious meals. Anything we can do to support healthy functioning of our digestive system improves our overall health. We've all heard not to eat after 7:00 p.m. The digestive system needs time for rest and repair as well.**

During a reflexology treatment, it's not uncommon for your digestive system to start making noises. This is perfectly normal, and a good sign that you've dropped into the parasympathetic healing and rest state.

As well as the reflexes of the Nervous, Endocrine, Respiratory, and Cardiovascular systems, the following reflexes of the Digestive system are worked during a reflexology treatment: Mouth, Upper and lower teeth, Esophagus, Gall Bladder, Stomach, Liver, Pancreas, Duodenum, Appendix, Ileocecal Valve, Ascending Colon, Hepatic Flexure, Transverse Colon, Splenic Flexure, Descending Colon, Sigmoid Flexure, Sigmoid Colon, and Rectum/Anus. Phew! (Pun intended!)

Urinary/Renal System is next, and yes, this body system can also be affected by stress, headache, and loss of sleep.

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