



Diarrhea, or liquid stool, occurs occasionally in all of us. The occasional and sudden form is often caused by a Gastro-Intestinal ("GI") virus, such as the recent noro-virus, which can also cause purging from the other end of the GI tract, i.e. vomiting. Sudden diarrhea can also be caused by food poisoning, when we eat food that is populated with an organism that irritates the GI tract itself or through toxins.

However, recurrent or persistent diarrhea is a very different animal, and as with constipation, it is more important than the discomfort that it produces--it represents a serious problem that is both a result and a cause of illness.

Previous articles have discussed leaky gut syndrome, stomach acid and enzymes, and constipation; therefore this article will only briefly touch upon these concepts and their related GI anatomy and physiology.

Persistent diarrhea is a medical emergency because it depletes the body of water and critical minerals (sodium and potassium, among others, collectively called "electrolytes"). Though we can survive without drinking water for up to a few weeks (depending upon the environmental conditions), because diarrhea so rapidly depletes us of our internal supply, that serious diarrhea can kill in a matter of days.

Until modern medicine discovered bacteria, parasites, and vaccines, diarrhea was a major cause of illness and death. The increased life expectancy that we all enjoy compared to just 150 years ago is due to public health measures of sanitation and vaccination, which largely prevent diarrheal illness. Unfortunately, third world countries still have significant morbidity and mortality due to poor nutrition and sanitation, with consequent death of the young and old from diarrhea. Though the average adult is supposed to drink approximately 8 cups of water day, the body pours numerous quarts of fluid and it's own cells into the GI tract each day to facilitate digestion. This water is absorbed throughout the small and large intestine, so by the time stool exits the body, there is only 5 ounces this water left. Digestion not only requires huge amounts of fluid; the entire process, including liver function, consumes 25% of our energy. This is why most creatures, when ill, lose their appetite--it is done to preserve energy and water. (So our mothers were wrong, eating while very sick does not help us heal, with the possible exception of thin fluids such as chicken soup!)

The body also loses water through the skin and urine, but it works hard to limit this loss, and will shut down these functions in cases of dehydration.

In extreme cases of diarrhea, where the lining of the GI tract is damaged, blood and mucus also appears in the stool. This is usually called colitis, or Inflammatory Bowel Disease ("IBD"). Modern medicine breaks colitis into two forms--Crohns Disease, which can affect the entire GI tract, and Ulcerative Colitis which usually affects the colon.

In addition, many people have Irritable Bowel Syndrome, or "IBS", which is not inflammatory. While classic IBS involves alternating diarrhea and constipation, some people have more of one or the other.

While Modern Medicine makes a distinction between all of these conditions, Holistic Medicine finds these distinctions somewhat arbitrary. In many cases, people progress from one to the other. IBD has an auto-immune aspect, where a confused immune system attacks the GI tract. In many cases, there is a family history of auto-

immune disease. However, genetics determine only 20% of our health--our lifestyles dominate by turning the bad and good genes on and off. We know this from identical twin studies, where twins have different disease profiles based on life factors. Fortunately, the holistic approach to colitis largely overlaps with the holistic treatment for autoimmune disease, so there can be healing of both (and other) conditions simultaneously.

Why Diarrhea?

The body's reason for diarrhea is often simple--it can't or doesn't want to handle what is in the bowel. The same usually goes with vomiting. Assuming that the body is wiser than our mind (modern man's mind is only 50-100,000 years old; our digestive wisdom is hundreds of millions of years old), we should acknowledge and be thankful for the message that our inner wisdom provides. However, because the symptoms of diarrhea are inconvenient and at times disabling, Modern Medicine, as it does with many conditions, has developed drugs that suppress diarrhea. This may be OK for a business trip or other time-limited issue, but to chronically use a suppressive often allows the root cause to be missed until the diarrhea spirals into a relentless, non-responsive misery. In such cases, desperate patients agree to have sections of their bowels surgically removed.

Holistic Approach

Any treatment that is complex and dangerous reeks of manipulation; whereas a treatment that is simple and elegant suggests that the root cause is being addressed. The holistic approach for diarrhea and colitis is relatively simple. It assumes that there are toxins that need to be eliminated, deficiencies that need to be corrected, and then repairs the GI tract's lining and ecology. This approach is successful in up to 90% of patients.

The approach sometimes begins with diagnostic tests; other times, when the story and situation are straightforward, treatment can begin rapidly, and the response (or non-response) to the treatment can validate the assessment or indicate a need for further testing.

While a conventional stool test can sometimes identify bad bacteria, yeast or parasites, there are limitations to the stool test. First of all, one or two stool samples may not yield sufficient quantities of the offending organism. Secondly, for some species, the lab technician must sift through the sample, looking for parasites or eggs. This job qualifies for the TV show "World's Dirtiest Jobs". Depending upon the diligence and experience of the technician and quality of the sample, parasites may or may not be found. Thirdly, the lower colon has little oxygen in its contents--most of the species living there are designed to live with little oxygen--called anaerobic organisms. Therefore, when a stool sample is exposed to the air, some of these organisms can perish or be significantly suppressed to limit detection. Lastly, it is hard to quantify the ratio of good to bad bacteria or yeast based on a sample. Since there is always some, detecting bad bacteria or yeast may or may not have any meaning.

There are ways around these limitations. Firstly, one lab has developed a test using DNA amplification, the same method used by CSI's to magnify the DNA found in a fingerprint or other small sample. In such a case, the

organism doesn't need to be found, only it's DNA. In another test, the urine is tested for markers that are produced by "bad" bacterial and yeast species and if present, represent significant presence and toxicity. However, the absence of such markers does not fully rule out these organisms. This special urine test also looks for markers for good bacteria, and if decreased, suggests the need for "pro-biotics".

Holistic Treatment

So, whether the tests are done first, or saved till later, treatment is initiated with natural agents, and the response provides additional diagnostic information.

The toxins that need to be considered include: bacteria, yeast, parasites, certain foods, chemical toxins, and emotional/energetic toxicity.

The deficiencies that need to be addressed include critical vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and oils that are needed for the body to repair the lining of the gut, to enable the immune system to mount an attack when there are offending organisms, and/or to suppress the immune system when it attacks the GI tract.

It is almost always effective to begin with "pro-biotic" bacteria and yeast. These are the good organisms that can re-populate the GI tract and push out the bad organisms.

It is also important to remove known toxins from the diet and lifestyle--which include hydrogenated oils, artificial sweeteners, caffeine, alcohol, cigarette smoke, pesticides, preservatives, colorants, and cosmetics (which are absorbed through the skin). Foods that are known to be allergenic should be removed, which include at least, all dairy, gluten, soy and nightshades. Since food allergy is a hidden but very prevalent condition, and in allergy the body can react to a single molecule, it is not sufficient to remove most of these foods--they must be totally eliminated, for a while at least. Some allergens persist for months. Once the situation is stable, missed foods can be re-introduced one at a time to observe whether there is a reaction.

Special mention should be made of Celiac Disease and gluten sensitivity ("GS"). Gluten is a family of proteins which are in different amounts in most grains, mostly wheat, spelt, rye, barley, and oat. Some people inherit a genetic sensitivity to glutes--and consumption of gluten will trigger an auto-immune reaction to the gut lining. Up to 90% of GS goes undiagnosed, and sometimes the tests are falsely negative (i.e. the person has GS but the test says there is none). Therefore, eliminating all grains except rice and quinoa is strongly advocated. Some people have sensitivities to foods without having a frank immune response, sometimes called food intolerance. This situation will be discussed in a future article.

The last toxin that needs to be briefly addressed are heavy metals such as lead and mercury, which though subtle, can alter immune, hormonal and nerve cell function and be a hidden cause of any disease.

Often, these measures alone will make a significant difference. Identifying and correcting deficiencies of critical nutrients, through supplementation, if tolerated, is an important component of healing. Important supplements include glutamine, fish oils, gamma linoleic acid (an anti-inflammatory omega-6 oil), vitamin D, and others. Sleep should be considered a nutrient that needs sufficient quality and quantity.

Additional measures include the adding of "pre-biotics", compounds that support the GI lining and the good bacteria that populates the gut.

In addition, when the lower GI tract is dysfunctional, it can reflect and/or cause dysfunction of the stomach,

pancreas, gallbladder and upper GI tract. Addition of digestive acid and enzymes (under the supervision of a properly trained practitioner) can be a critical component of healing. Supporting the body's detoxification systems through special supplements can also be necessary.

Chronic illness can cause adrenal fatigue; testing and or treatment may be indicated early or late in the process based on numerous considerations--see the article on this topic published previously.

Lastly, the energetic aspects of the gut should always be considered. In Ayurvedic (Indian) and Chinese medicine, the colon has a significant relationship to emotional and spiritual themes of control, survival, obsession, anxiety, grief and depression. A remarkable healing has been experienced by numerous "unresponsive" patients by the addition of yoga, acupuncture and other specific energy treatments.

There are additional tests and measures that are in the tool box of the holistic practitioner. Most cases of diarrhea and colitis can be healed, even after decades, if these principles are applied systematically in a collaborative relationship between a patient and holistic practitioner.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of an experienced practitioner.

For More Information

- O See Dr. Cheikin's related articles on: Leaky Gut Syndrome, Adrenal Fatigue, Gut & Inflammation, Detoxification and others
- O Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, has more information
- O Dr. Cheikin offers workshops in several holistic health topics. Please call for more information or to host a Workshop.
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