



*If your sewer backed up into your basement, how would it smell on the second floor?*

The colon or large intestine is the sewer system of the body, where solid waste is processed and awaits removal. The colon has three sections--ascending (on the right side of the abdomen), transverse (across the top of the abdomen), and descending (on the left side). The descending colon ends in the rectum, which stores the feces, and ends at the anal sphincter, which controls when the contents are released.

The gut is controlled by a complex nervous system within its wall, by messages from the brain, as well as by neuro-transmitters which are produced by the gut and the brain. This system is called the gut-brain, or gut-mind, and significantly affects how we think and feel (see below).

By the time foods enter the large intestine (exiting the small intestine), most of the critical nutrients have been absorbed. The role of the colon is to extract water and minerals from the remaining material, converting it from a liquid to a solid form. If it doesn't do its duty (sic), then this liquid, called diarrhea, causes the loss of water and other minerals, and was and is the cause of death in the young and old. The contagious diseases diphtheria (for which we continue to immunize our children), and cholera are still a prevalent cause of death in third-world nations. Diarrhea will be discussed in a future article.

Another function of the colon is to house billions of bacteria, adding up to as much as three pounds in an adult. These bacteria defend us against unhealthy bacteria and yeast, and manufacture critical nutrients such as vitamin B12, Biotin (B7), Vitamin K, and others.

The functioning of colon is central to the concept of illness in the ancient traditions of Chinese and Ayurvedic Medicine. The gastro-intestinal tract occupies a huge amount of our real estate, and consumes approximately 25% of our energy.

## **What is Constipation, or "How Often Should We Go"?**

Most people are surprised to learn about the frequency that is considered optimal. If you have witnessed how often a baby or pet empties its bowels, the answer for adults should be the same--once with each meal. This is based on a pre-programmed process in the body called the "gastro-colic reflex". This simple reflex means that when the body detects food coming in one end (gastro=stomach), it makes room at the other end (colic). So, going three times a day, approximately, is "normal". Therefore going once a day, or even less, is not "normal". Some patients vigorously defend their bowels and their habits, feeling insulted that their innards are criticized. However, the ancient models and modern science agree on this fact.

Some define constipation on the basis of the solidness or hardness of the stool. However, the hardness of the stool has to do with the "transit time"--the slower the transit time, the more time the colon has to extract fluids and make the stool hard. Therefore, more frequent bowel movements are usually softer.

Finally, constipation sometimes refers to the sense of completion of a bowel movement. When transit is slow, or the stool is hard, then there is often a sensation of fullness

that is not relieved by a bowel movement.

In summary, constipation is bowel movements are less than twice a day, too hard, or incomplete.

## **Causes and Consequences of Constipation**

Constipation is caused by a number of conditions, which include, to name a few: insufficient water, insufficient fiber, insufficient magnesium, imbalance of bacteria and yeast (dysbiosis), parasite infection, food allergy, lack of stomach acid and enzymes, "leaky gut syndrome" (see prior article), use of numerous drugs and hormones, neurological dysfunction, emotional-energetic dysfunction, to name a few.

Constipation is much more than a matter of discomfort to a holistic practitioner. Its presence reflects GI dysfunction, and therefore secondary dysfunctions elsewhere in the body.

When the bowels don't empty, the toxins in the stool can leach back into the body, causing dysfunction of many systems. Brain dysfunction is manifest by poor concentration, fog, and emotional instability. Toxicity of the energy-producing processes of the body causes fatigue. Other toxins can overwhelm the liver (whose job is to process as many toxins as possible), manifesting as oversensitivity to chemicals, including alcohol. In addition, since 50% of the immune system resides in the abdomen, watching what goes on, these toxins can cause confusion of the immune system, causing allergy, auto-immune disease and cancer. Hormonal balance can be easily altered by such toxins.

Some of these toxins are volatile, get back into the bloodstream, and exit the body through the lungs, causing bad breath.

These toxins act as stressors; so even if a person doesn't feel under stress emotionally, the body still reacts. The stress response activates adrenal and other hormones, raises blood pressure and blood sugar and changes other parameters such as blood flow throughout the body. Chronic physiological stress is a common cause of fatigue and accelerated aging.

These toxins also stoke the fire of inflammation, which affects the joints (arthritis), blood vessels (heart and circulation), brain (anxiety/ depression/ concentration dysfunction) and virtually every tissue of the body.

## **Psycho-Spiritual-Energetics and the Gut-Brain**

We have heard about the obsessive, "anal-retentive" personality. In Chinese Medicine, the Large Intestine meridian is associated with themes of depression and grief. In Indian, or Ayurvedic medicine, the root chakra, which is involved with the bowels, reflects issues of survival. These psycho-emotional themes are often relevant in people with bowel dysfunction. Since the mind and body work synchronistically, as the bowels work better, so does the emotions; and visa versa. Most people with these issues note that during vacation or increased stress, bowel function improves or worsens accordingly. Healing of constipation (and other bowel dysfunctions) will be facilitated by work on the psycho-energetic dimension, through modalities such as acupuncture, yoga and others.

Modern science has shown that the gut produces several important neuro-chemicals that affect brain function, such as serotonin, the chemical modulated by popular drugs such as Prozac (a SSRI, or "Selective Serotonin Re-Uptake Inhibitor). Adults and children with gut dysfunction can show emotional and cognitive problems, such as anxiety, depression, panic, ADD, autism, mood instability, brain fog and others. This gut-brain also interacts with the hormonal and immune systems, creating the potential for dis-ease or healing by recognizing and addressing these connections.

### "Irritable Bowel Syndrome" or IBS

While classic IBS refers to a bowel that alternates between diarrhea or constipation, there are times when this condition manifests as primarily constipation or diarrhea. For the primarily constipated type, the new drug, Amitiza, works through modulation of the serotonin system discussed above.

### Dysbiosis and Parasites Lead to Leaky Gut

As discussed above, the colon is a garden, designed to contain up to 400 species of good bacteria, yeast and parasites, all with a purpose. Due to numerous factors, the ratio of good-to-bad species, which should be 90%-10%, can be reversed, called "dysbiosis". When this happens, like weeds overcrowding a garden, the bad species produce specific toxins which damage the gut lining, affecting the nervous, immune and hormonal systems, a complex situation called "leaky gut", explained in detail in a prior article.

### Colon Cancer and other Modern Ills

It is no big surprise that the factors that promote constipation also promote colon cancer, one of the most prevalent cancers. These factors include a low fiber diet, lack of exercise, lack of plant foods and an excess of animal foods (see Campbell). Though there is no formal study connecting constipation with colon cancer and other conditions, the converse has been shown--that the healthier lifestyles that prevent constipation also prevent cancer and other chronic dis-eases. Most holistic patients notice that once chronic constipation is resolved, many other health issues begin to improve.

### Cleanses, Detoxes, Fasts and Colonics

There has been a lot of hype on the internet and TV about cleanses and detoxes. Though there is merit to "spring cleaning", many of the toxins in our body hide in the tissues and cells of our body--therefore a simple one week process is usually not sufficient and may release toxins that the liver and other organs cannot handle. Detoxes, fasts and colonics do have a important role, but should be structured and supervised by professionals trained in their science and art.

### Holistic Evaluation and Treatment of Constipation

Holistic care for constipation involves consideration of all the factors discussed above. However, anyone with constipation can try the following steps. The response, or non-response to these measures will provide important information:

1. Drink at least one ounce of pure water for every two pounds of weight daily.

2. Gradually increase fiber, preferably through organic fruits and vegetables.
3. Regular exercise, such as walking.
4. Yoga poses and practice. Breath massages, yoga twists
5. Regularly eat non-pasteurized, non-dairy fermented foods such as sauerkraut or kimchi, or take a refrigerated pro-biotic which includes a blend of bacteria and yeast.
6. Trial of food elimination--especially dairy, wheat and soy.

There are additional measures that are best implemented following special tests. The holistic evaluation and treatment of chronic constipation is often successful when the above concepts are applied in a scientific, organized fashion.

**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](http://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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