

Stomach problems? Try food

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An elderly patient of mine suffered from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) with abdominal pain and alternating constipation and diarrhea. Standard medication either didn't work or had unpleasant side effects. She ended up controlling her constipation with peanut butter and the diarrhea with banana and was happy as a peanut butter-banana eating clam until she died at age ninety-two.

Her solution jived with my food-is-medicine philosophy. If possible, I prefer that to the spend-a-small-fortune-on-supplements-and-medications-with-side-effects-and-drug-interactions approach.

As with all things human and medicinal, some work in some people and some don't. Here are a few food remedies to try for gastro-intestinal maladies.

Motility problems like esophageal reflux, heartburn, diabetic gastroparesis and constipation:

Rhubarb stimulates gut motility that propels food, secretions and stool through the esophagus, stomach and intestine. Fresh rhubarb is hard to find, and I know of no studies of rhubarb pie or jam efficacy. The water in which rhubarb is boiled works well. As does rhubarb powder, but that creates a supplement product, which raises issues of purity, dose and side effects.

I've written about foods that cause heartburn before – These are the few that one might omit to help that symptom. See this past article:

http://www.healthychoicesformindandbody.org/Medisense_Articles/17122-Heartburn_Treatment.pdf

Nausea: Ginger often tames nausea associated with pregnancy and chemotherapy and quells symptoms of motion sickness. Candied ginger works well, is portable and avoids issues of dose: Just eat enough. The only problem is keeping it down when nausea

is accompanied by intractable vomiting. There are limits to food therapy.

Diarrhea: Banana or banana flakes bind up diarrhea. Some people swear by green banana. Reducing (not cutting out) dietary non-absorbable sugars like sorbitol (in prunes, cherries and pears) and fructose might help, but only rare people should cut their fruit intake to less than 2 fruits per day. Reducing dietary fiber might help but isn't particularly healthy. Ditto for dehydration.

Constipation: Except in people who have abused laxatives or have genetically slow/weak colon contractions. Constipation is the easiest to treat. Start with LOTS of water: The right amount is the amount that works for an individual. Add high sorbitol fruits like prunes, pears and cherries. Top off with peanut butter and LOTS of leafy and cruciferous vegetables.

Bloating: Make sure you are not constipated (see above), then go to sleep. Most of us pass gas and lose the bloat at night. Cutting out too much fiber, fruits and vegetables might starve the gas-producing bacteria in stool, but it's not very healthy.

Abdominal pain from spasm: Peppermint oil might attenuate abdominal pain related to spasm by relaxing smooth muscle in the gut. Between 0.05 - 0.1 ml taken 3-4 times per day seem to work (use a dropper – these doses are small fractions of a teaspoon. It may cause side effects of heartburn and nausea, which abate with dose reduction (or adding ginger and rhubarb?).

Spasm might respond to curcumin in turmeric-containing foods. Unfortunately, many are spicy, which might lead to other symptoms.

Too often people blame their symptoms on food, rather than more likely culprits, like antibiotic treatment, unbalanced diets, infections or stress.

Seems to me that we shouldn't be use healthy foods to stay healthy, rather than risking malnutrition by cutting out foods.