

Digest This

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We're heading into a season that for many people means gastric disaster. Parties, social events, food gifts and overindulgence all can mean problems with digestion and symptoms such as bloating, gas and discomfort. There are, however, herbs and spices that can help alleviate these symptoms and are easy to incorporate into your diet. Sure beats another prescription.....

One of the simplest things to do is to start your day with a "tea" of freshly grated ginger, lemon juice, a dab of honey and hot water. The ginger and lemon juice stimulate both saliva (which starts digestion) and digestive enzymes in the stomach. This can be done also just before a party or big meal. Start with fresh ginger and either mince it finely or grate it on a ceramic grater; about 2 tablespoons is right for a cup. Add hot water, then let it steep for a few minutes. Strain the ginger out, then add freshly squeezed lemon juice (about a half a lemon) and a little honey to taste.

Other herbs and spices that help to "predigest" food include black and cayenne peppers, cardamom and licorice. Prior to a party in which you expect to overindulge, chew on cardamom seeds or take a small amount of licorice extract in water. With this in your stomach, food will go down more easily. (Be careful, as licorice root can elevate blood pressure if used routinely).

Poorly digested food undergoes fermentation, rather than digestion, in our systems. This causes gas buildup and discomfort. Herbs that are traditionally used to avoid this are called carminatives; they help to digest the food after the fact. Carminative herbs include fennel, sweetish bitters and turmeric. Chewing on fennel seeds after a meal or party (swallowing the liquid produced but spitting out the pulp) helps to stop gas production. These seeds are commonly found in Indian restaurants in small dishes as you leave the building. Old fashioned angustura bitters are also carminative, so consider an after dinner drink of angustura bitters, club soda and a twist of lemon or lime.

Maintaining the appropriate gut flora is also important; these normal bacteria not only help to digest our food but also produce several needed vitamins and other nutrients. If you like yogurt, make sure you eat plenty during the holidays, so long as it says "active cultures" and doesn't include too much sugar or human-made chemicals. Another option for getting these beneficial bacteria into your system is to drink kefir, a liquid yogurt-type drink. This can be purchased or made at home; see <http://users.sa.chariot.net.au/~dna/kefirpage.html> for more information. (Note: if you want to make kefir at home, please contact me at the office, as I have extra kefir grain starter to give away).

An often overlooked but important key to digestion is stress. When you're feeling stressed, your system is sending relatively less blood and nutrients to your GI track, so your digestion is compromised. Although the holidays can be wonderful, they are often a time of high stress and anxiety; travel, extra chores to do, family gatherings, work parties, all can lead to the feeling of being overly busy and stressed out. To help combat this, first learn to say "no" to any invitation that you think might not be in your best interest. On top of that, try lemon balm tea or

chamomile tea for their calming effects. Another option is valerian or passionflower tea. Slow deep breathing and time in your schedule to sit quietly and unwind are also key.

So don't let this holiday season tie you up in knots; work on remaining calm and don't let your gut get the better of you!