

TREAT THE CAUSE, NOT THE SYMPTOM

By Monica Montag, MA, HHP, CN

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What do the following symptoms have in common?

- bloating
- gas
- diarrhea
- constipation
- urinary frequency and urgency
- arthritis
- Hashimoto's and Graves autoimmune thyroiditis
- fatigue
- leaky gut hidden food allergies

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IF YOU ANSWERED “hidden infections of the small intestine” you are correct!

One of the most common blocks to overall good health are hidden infections. These are overgrowths of unfriendly bacteria in our small and/or large intestines. I believe that these infections have become an epidemic in our country and are still largely unrecognized by most physicians.

Did you know that there are 10 times more microorganisms in our digestive tract than cells in our bodies? They play a significant role in our immunity, metabolism, and overall health. There are “neighborhoods” of various species of these bacteria that populate different areas of our intestines. The wrong balance between some of them can actually cause weight loss resistance by causing more calories to be extracted from food in those relationships with the wrong ratio. Certain bacteria may actually trigger serious diseases such as reactive arthritis (associated with Klebsiella, Salmonell and, Yersinia) and Hashimoto's and Grave's autoimmune thyroiditis (associated with Yersinia Enterocolitica).

People are usually unaware that they have an infection, so they may treat the

symptoms, such as diarrhea or bloating, but not the cause. And sometimes it takes years of the cumulative effects of chronic imbalances to create symptoms, so the whole problem remains under the undiagnosed.

So, why the upswing in hidden infections? There are two reasons: One, the improper use of antibiotics and two, the over-use of antacid medications.

Let's take a look at how these practices set us up for infections.

When people take antibiotics, they kill off not only the targeted bacteria, such as the ones causing an ear infection, but also the healthy or “good” bacteria in the entire digestive tract. When this happens, the balance of “good” bacteria vs. “bad bacteria” is upset, and the “bad” guys can win. This is also why people often develop yeast infections while taking an antibiotic. The harmful pathogens can include bacteria, yeast/fungi, and even parasites, and may even be a combination of all three. This imbalance in gut flora is called “dysbiosis”.

There are times when antibiotics are necessary. They are not the enemy, but we have to be smart about using them and always accompany them with probiotics so there's no opportunity for gut flora

to get out of balance. A simple way to prevent subsequent problems from antibiotic use is to take them with a probiotic. The probiotic has to be taken two to three hours after the antibiotic or the latter will kill off the good bacteria in the probiotic. Use a probiotic for the entire duration of an antibiotic treatment and for two weeks after, for good measure.

Sometimes people mistakenly feel that they have food allergies because they experience bloating and gas after eating. But these symptoms can also be the result of various simple carbohydrates, especially sugars, feeding the unfriendly bacteria. It is their waste products that create the bloating and gas, not food allergies. By eliminating the infection, the symptoms often clear up.

A particularly nasty hidden infection is the Candida yeast infection. It most often causes vaginal itching, but can also show up as rectal itching or burning, brain fog, sore joints, itchy skin, chronic cystitis, fatigue and chronic bloating and gas. Taking a strong probiotic can eliminate these infections.

If you have a long term yeast infection, it must be addressed in the digestive tract rather than just vaginally. This is because recurring yeast infections are caused by

reinfection from the digestive tract. It's that simple. Until the yeast is brought under control in the entire digestive tract, the infections will continue.

The second major cause of the upswing in hidden infections in any part of the digestive tract is the overuse of antacids such as Nexium, Prilosec, Pepcid AC, Zantac, etc. There are many of them, with different mechanisms, but when used improperly, the end result is the same. They eventually impair digestion and pave the way for an imbalance in gut flora.

These products were designed to be used for a maximum of six weeks, and yet many of my clients have been on them for years. These products change the pH of the digestive tract and in doing so, make it easier for unfriendly bacteria to take over the digestive system, causing all the problems we have already discussed.

Long term use of antacids also decreases enzyme production. They may help in the short run by calming inflammation in the lining of the stomach but over time, they start to suppress stomach acid production.

In most cases, suppressing stomach acid is ill-advised. Most people struggle with stomach acid that is already insufficient, and hence their symptoms occur. Remember, just because it burns doesn't mean it's acidic. Think about how caustic lye is, with a high pH of 14, and yet it burns. So relying on heartburn and general gastric inflammation as symptoms can be misleading. It's not always a good idea to suppress stomach acid!

For those who have GERD, or acid reflux, consider why the esophageal sphincter has gotten loose or weak, allowing stomach fluids to back up into the esophagus? Again, it has to do with the stomach pH being too alkaline.

Stomach pH determines how tight this flap is and if it's too alkaline, the sphincter loses tone and reflux happens. With the correct pH, it is nice and tight and stomach acid no longer backs up into the esophagus, stopping the reflux. Probiotics are also helpful when regulat-

ing the stomach pH. (See inset.)

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms discussed in this article, consider a nutritional approach to your complaints rather than a symptom-focused solution. ❖

Here are some of the key signs of low stomach acid:

- o Belching after meals
 - o Gas and bloating within an hour of eating
 - o Feeling of fullness in stomach after eating
 - o Poor stomach emptying
 - o No morning hunger
 - o Nausea and heartburn after eating
 - o In extreme cases, vomiting after eating
 - o Chronic diarrhea
 - o Undigested food in the stool
 - o Peeling, breaking fingernails
 - o Joint aches and muscle weakness (due to undigested proteins)
 - o Hair loss (mostly in women)
 - o Chronic anemia
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HOW TO CHOOSE A GREAT PROBIOTIC:

Make sure it's refrigerated. Remember, you are buying live bacteria, so don't believe the claims that they stay alive in a product you buy off the shelf. They will do fine if you set out a week's worth in your vitamin holder, but refrigerate the bottle at home as well. If you are travelling, don't leave them in a hot car or in your checked baggage. Put them in your purse.

Most people can benefit from a product containing FOS (fructooligosaccharides). This is a special blend of carbohydrates that feed the healthy bacteria and help you maintain a good colony. If however, you think you have a yeast or bacterial overgrowth, stay away from the products with FOS because they'll feed the bad bugs as well as the good. If you're not sure, start with a non-FOS product.

Go for high potency, 12-60 billion to start. Once your digestion improves, 5 billion is fine for maintenance and is less expensive. At that point you want a product with FOS.

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