

Episode 066: You Are NOT What You Eat: Here's What's Going Down... 9 Ways to Improve Your Digestion Today

This is The TD Fitness Podcast with Coach T episode number 66.

Welcome to The TD Fitness Podcast . Giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living. And now your host, certified health coach and personal trainer Coach T.

This is episode number 66 of The TD Fitness Podcast. I'm your host Coach T, and I want you to know that you are not what you eat, and I want to give you some ways to improve your digestion today so that you can be closer to what you eat. But first, why do I say that you are not what you eat? We hear all the time you are what you eat.

Well, let's dive into that. Saying you are what you eat is like saying that what you believe or what you intend to do will get you to your goals for better health. Whether it's to lose weight or to exercise more, but you and I both know that it takes more than good intentions to get to your goals. It takes application, it takes actually doing something. And the same is true with nutrition and digestion.

You see, we expect, and we intend for our healthy eating to serve us in the way that it's advertised, but guess what? No matter how many fruits, no matter how many vegetables, how much healthy fats or good proteins or fiber you consume, if your body isn't processing it correctly, then you are not getting the benefits that you think you're getting. And that is why I say and why registered dieticians will tell you that you are not what you eat, but rather you are what your body digests and absorbs.

Let's talk about this digestive process because there are a lot of misconceptions about how our bodies process the food we eat. And along the way I'll point out some tips for you to improve your own digestion so that you can get the full benefit of all of that healthy eating. So let's start with this. Optimally, we absorb over 90% of what we eat. That's if everything is working properly, but I'll tell you that everything is not working properly in most of us.

A couple of studies that I've found showed that 20% of Americans suffer from digestive diseases and up to 75% of Americans suffer some type of digestive or GI, that's gastrointestinal discomfort. So how's that for a gut check? So where does digestion begin? If I asked you that question, you might say it begins in the stomach, or maybe you'd say, "No, actually digestion begins in the mouth."

Well, those are both key phases of the digestive process, but digestion actually begins in the brain. You see, the brain can receive hunger signals from the stomach. It can be triggered by senses, like seeing something that looks good to eat on TV. It could be triggered by smelling something, for example, like walking down the baked goods aisle and you smelled freshly baked goods, or you smell a cookout or something like that.

All those things can start the digestive process because what happens is when your brain tells you to start the digestion process, your mouth produces saliva and that saliva is going to help with lubrication. It also helps to break down the food that you eat through enzymes that are in that saliva. Your teeth obviously work to break apart the food, but through chewing, your tongue moves the food around in your mouth and then the food moves down to the stomach through the esophagus.

It'll do this even if you're standing upside down because of the way the musculature works. It's the pulsing muscles that move that food down to the stomach. So when it gets to the stomach, some absorption does occur in the stomach, but mainly the food continues to break down by way of the stomach acids that are located there. And the food will stay in your stomach for anywhere between one and four hours and how quickly it leaves your stomach is really a function of a number of different things.

It could be how solid or liquid the food is, how big or how small the food particles are, and even the types of nutrients play a big part in how quickly the food leaves your stomach. So for example, if it's very liquidy then it's going to exit your stomach quicker. If the particles are very small, then that will exit your stomach and move into the small intestine quicker. And when it comes to nutrients, carbohydrates, proteins and fats ... Well, carbs are actually digested and absorbed the quickest.

They leave the stomach first. Proteins will stay a little bit longer, fats even longer than that and fiber stays in your stomach the longest. That's why you can consume simple carbohydrates like white rice, white bread, potato chips and things like that and you'll be hungry just a short time later because those types of foods leave the stomach relatively quickly and they don't satisfy your hunger. That's also often why you'll hear me recommend whole foods, healthy fats, fiber and protein, because those things tend to keep you fuller longer because those things remain in your stomach for a longer period of time.

And when you think about this, it's also worth considering when you think about whether or what you can or should eat before you exercise. If you're going out for a longer run, for example, you need to think about whether or not you want something sitting in your stomach for that longer period of time. So maybe eat something that will flow through your stomach a little bit quicker.

So from the stomach, the food will move into the small intestine and it will remain there for anywhere between four and eight hours. And this is where most of the nutrient absorption occurs. The gallbladder releases bile to break down fat, to make the fat easier to absorb. This is also where the fiber that you eat really does its magic to lower your cholesterol.

The food is moved through the mouth, down the esophagus, into the stomach and into the small intestine and the next it moves into the large intestine. And there it will stay for anywhere between 12 and 25 more hours. The large intestine is what is going to help to form your stool. It houses the good bacteria, those probiotics. And this is where the final stages, if you will, of digestion occurs.

Now, there are a couple of other things that are important when we talk about or think about digestion. The first is hormones, and if you think back to episode number 29, if you haven't listened to that one, I highly recommend it. That's where I talk about body, set-point weight and hormones and how our bodies work against our weight loss efforts.

But hormones can make us feel hungry or make us feel full. Also, neurotransmitters are important because they do things like make us happy when we eat. That's a real thing.

TDFit066 (Completed 02/23/19)

Neurotransmitters also slow down transit time, which may or may not be optimal for your digestive system. Neurotransmitters shut down the digestive process so more energy goes toward your limbs during what's called fight or flight response.

And a little bit more on this. I started by saying that the brain is part of the digestive process. In fact, that's where the digestive process begins and it's because the brain is part of the body's nervous system and the nervous system helps to control our digestive track. The nervous system acts to shut down digestion and appetite during times of stress. Again, this is part of what's called the fight or flight response.

And this is something, fight or flight is something that's deeply ingrained in the human genome, if you will. It serves to send all of the available resources, blood and energy to the places it's needed most during extreme stress. So if you think back, a prehistoric example would be that, if you came up upon a saber-toothed tiger for example, you don't want to be thinking about, "Man, I'm really hungry right now."

You want all cylinders firing on, "I gotta get outta here right away." And that's essentially what fight or flight is. Well, guess what, there are stresses that still exist today, but they're triggered by different types of things on a day to day basis, but the body still reacts to those stresses in the same way and it serves to inhibit digestion.

So you can see that if you're having digestion issues and you're under a lot of constant stress, then it may not be what you're eating at all. It may be the amount of stress that you're under. So the point of all that is that hormones and neurotransmitters can have an emotional and psychological effect, real effects on digestion.

Another thing I want to point out, food allergies and intolerances. So it's important to break out the difference here because an allergy is life threatening. You can go into anaphylactic shock. It's serious. Usually results in the use of an EpiPen and a trip to the emergency room. An allergic reaction is usually caused by one of the top eight foods that account for about 90% of all food allergies.

Those are eggs, fish, shellfish, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, soy and wheat. But intolerances are different. Food intolerances are a little bit harder to diagnose. Sometimes they're harder to identify and sometimes they're just brushed aside as either heartburn or an upset stomach. Sometimes we just think of intolerances as some kind of irregularity in our bathroom routine, but intolerances are real too and they can affect how and what we digest and what we're comfortable eating and what nutrients we get because of that.

In part of my research for this podcast topic, I came across a health line article entitled: The 11 Best Ways to Improve Your Digestion Naturally. I'll link to that in the show notes. I encourage you to check it out. It's really a good synopsis, but what I've done, I'll just take a few of those 11 tips and then I want to add a couple more to give you what I consider nine simple ways to improve digestion. And the first has got to be to eat real food.

I'm talking whole foods versus processed foods. Whole foods are metabolized better. They're more nutritious for you and your body will thank you. Because whole foods are important when it comes to getting all of the nutrients you need extracted through that digestion process. The second, increase your fiber. Fiber can be found in oats, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables. Fiber is going to help keep you regular. It's going to improve the consistency of your stool and it helps reduce bad cholesterol.

And speaking of cholesterol, the third thing I'll point out is that healthy fats, incorporating some healthy fats, which come from some fish, nuts, oils, that helps to increase good cholesterol. Proper hydration is number four. Hydration helps with all sorts of things. Digestion being one of them. This is one of the first things that we look at in the Fit Life program. It's easy to implement. Relatively speaking, relatively easy to implement, add more water to your day, yet the reward is so huge. You move better, you feel better, your digestion works better. So proper hydration is key.

Next, we talked already about stress and how stress can, as the article points out, stress can 'wreak havoc' on your digestive system. And it goes so far as to link stress to stomach ulcers, diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome. So stress is, it's important to consider. Reducing the stress in your life so that your digestive process actually works better. Mindful eating is one way that we can address that. And that's number six, mindful eating.

And that means basically paying attention to what you eat, how you eat, and how much you eat. And then number seven, regular movement. And I'm not just talking about regular exercise, but moving throughout the day. If you can avoid sitting for more than more than an hour or so at a time, then do that. Get up and move around. You'll find that things move through you more easily when you're up and moving.

And the last couple that I'll point out is that if you're having issues like some kind of intolerance, then try tracking what you eat and look for patterns, not just tracking the food that you take in, but also look for things or make a note of things like how you feel or what triggered you to eat. You're able to gain some significant insight into your eating patterns in positive and negative trends when you can go back and look at how you ate and why.

And then finally, if you are having some significant issues, do not hesitate to reach out to a health professional, namely a registered dietitian. So if you go to eatright.org, which is the website for the academy of nutrition and dietetics, you'll see there that it says, "Anyone can call themselves a nutritionist, but only a registered dietician has completed multiple layers of education and training." That includes a four year degree, they've practiced at a healthcare facility and passed a registered exam.

So that's what you need to look for when it comes to getting sound advice on your nutrition practices and your digestion issues that you have. Those are the things that I want you to think about when it comes to improving your diet. Remember, you are not what you eat, you are what you digest and absorb, so don't let that effort of eating so well go to waste by neglecting the things that can help your digestion run more smoothly. All right, so that's all I have for this episode. I'll tell you that if you want to assess your digestion and address some ways to improve it, I encourage you to check out my Fit Life program.

It includes a digestion assessment and recommendations for improvement, and that's from our registered dietician partners at Better Nutrition. As well as a host of other nutrition based resources that they provide. If you found the information in this episode helpful, go ahead and share it, like it and leave a comment or rate the podcast, however you want to respond based on whether you're watching or listening to this, and the show notes for this episode can be found at tdfitness.net/066. As always, I wish you happiness and health. Thank you for listening. Coach T out.