Most people experience digestive health problems at one time or another. The digestive system is made up of the digestive tract—a series of organs (mouth, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine (colon) rectum and anus). These organs help the body break down and absorb food that builds and nourishes cells to provide energy. Have you ever suffered from bloating, cramping, gas, constipation, heartburn, nausea, or diarrhea after a meal? Usually, people consider their symptoms merely an inconvenience. However, your digestive system is extremely important as it functions to support the rest of the body and deliver nutrients through the body. When the digestive system malfunctions, the entire body is at risk. Poor food choices can lead to disruptive everyday symptoms like gas and abdominal pain, as well as a number of health problems. Other factors include poor sleep habits, stress, and dehydration, all of which can contribute to digestive health problems.

Here are a few more tips to improve your digestive health:

**Eat a balanced and varied diet.**
Make sure your diet includes plenty of fruits and vegetables. Foods that specifically promote intestinal health include dried plums, bran, whole grain breads and cereals, beans, and nuts. Try to limit fats and fried foods, and avoid concentrated sweets; instead, emphasize complex carbohydrates. These are found in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains, bread, cereal, rice, wheat pasta, potatoes, dry beans, carrots, corn, green beans, broccoli, and spinach.

**Get enough fluids.**
You can get your fluids through beverages or foods. Be sure to have a beverage with every meal or snack. Low-calorie, decaffeinated options include water, herbal teas, and fruit juices with no added sugars.

**Eat small, frequent meals.**
How you eat is just as important as what you eat. Eat slowly, stop eating when you feel full, and don’t eat just before bedtime. Make time for proper nutrition. Take along good-for-you portable snacks such as fresh or dried fruit, granola, and almonds.

**Exercise regularly.**
Engage in activities you enjoy daily. Try aerobic or strength-building activities. Or, try stretching exercises like yoga or Pilates. Regular exercise keeps food moving through your system, reducing constipation.

**Manage your stress.**
Relaxing should be a part of your daily to-do list, just as work, social, and family obligations are. Getting enough sleep is also essential in managing stress. Make it a priority to get to bed at a reasonable hour, and limit your caffeine intake to the morning.
Maintain a healthy body weight. Reduce food portions and drink plenty of water.

Limit caffeine, alcohol, and smoking. Liquor, coffee, sodas, and cigarettes can lead to stomach ulcers, heartburn, and dehydration.

Manage your medications. Prescription pain medications can cause constipation. Always read the medication side effects. Others to watch out for are calcium supplements, antidepressants, antihistamines, and iron supplements.

On the road:
- Carry whole wheat crackers
- Carry packets of hot cereal
- Carry dried fruit
- Eat yogurt or cottage cheese
- Carry ginger (powdered) or candy
- Carry nuts like almonds or your own trail mix

Resources
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse
American Dietetic Association
California Dried Plum Board

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county’s name to find the number.

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