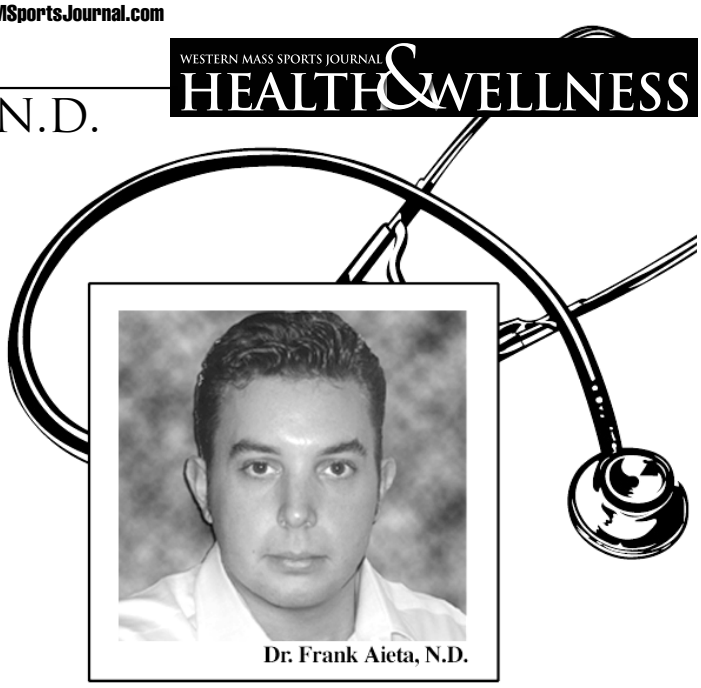
STAYING HEALTHY
WITH DR. AIETA, N.D.

IMPROVING DIGESTION AND ABSORPTION



Dr. Frank Aieta, N.D.

We all have heard the saying "you are what you eat." But it should actually be "you are what you are able to absorb."

When I talk with patients, I tell them that one of the most important things in achieving optimal health is proper digestion and absorption. You could eat the most nutritious foods and take the best vitamins on the planet, but if you have an impaired ability to digest your food and absorb your nutrients, then you are no better off than someone who takes no supplements and has a poor diet.

Proper digestion is accomplished when a person produces enough stomach acid and digestive enzymes to properly break down food and drink. As we age, our digestive function tends to decline, and it becomes harder to digest large meals and certain foods. Symptoms of low digestive function include the following: bloating and belching after meals; a sensation that food is sitting in the stomach for hours after a meal; heartburn; bad breath; and regurgitation of food even hours after eating. Some patients will go to their medical doctors with these complaints, and the typical treatment is a prescription for an antacid or an acid-blocking drug.

These drugs can actually make the situation much worse. If we were to ask why we make stomach acid, the most logical answer would be "To digest our food." So the million-dollar question is: "Why do so many doctors routinely prescribe drugs that shut down stomach acid?"

These drugs are among the most commonly prescribed pharmaceuticals, and I can honestly say that one out of every five patients that I see is on one of them. When patients stay on these medications too long, the drugs can impair their ability to absorb vital minerals such as calcium, magnesium, zinc, chromium, and vitamins such as B-12, to name just a few.

This impairment can lead to the progression of diseases such as osteoporosis. Also, when patients are on these medications, the intestinal tract can become a prime environment for bad bacteria and yeast to overgrow, thus leading to problems such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers and even stomach or colon cancer.

It is well known that ulcers are caused by an overgrowth of the bacteria called h. pylori which attach to the wall of the stomach and erode the tissue. When you are on an antacid or an acid-blocking drug, you may not even realize that an ulcer is forming because you won't feel it. This may be due to the lack of stomach acid. Untreated ulcers can actually lead to stomach cancer.

At this point, you have to be wondering what you can do to improve digestion and avoid being put on one of these drugs.

The first thing that I do with all of my patients is change their diet. I encourage patients to eat small meals that are easier to digest and try to eliminate some of the most allergenic foods first, such as wheat, dairy and corn, for example. Next, I encourage them to chew their food thoroughly, and eat slowly. One trick to eating slower is to hold your fork in your non-dominant hand and to put the fork down in between bites of food.

Another great way to improve digestive function is to supplement with digestive enzymes in a capsule form. I typically have my patients use these with larger meals or when consuming the more allergenic foods. Finally, I recommend taking acidophilus, a healthy bacterium found in yogurt, in a capsule form to enhance digestion and to prevent the overgrowth of harmful bacteria in the intestinal tract.

Many times these strategies can greatly improve most of the symptoms described above, as opposed to masking them with medications.

Dr. Frank Aieta is a board-certiped and licensed Naturopathic Physician with a private practice in West Hartford, Conn. He specializes in the treatment of disease, using natural therapies such as acupuncture, homeopathy, spinal manipulation, clinical nutrition, and herbal medicine. If there is a specipc topic you would like to see addressed in an upcoming column, you can e-mail him at DrAieta@aol.com, or visit www.DrAieta.com for additional information.

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