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Stomach acid: when too much might actually be too little!

Another barbeque party... hamburgers or wieners with white bread, ketchup, relish and bright yellow mustard, potato salad, marshmallow salad, and a multitude of cookies and cakes, all washed down with a beer or two..... here come the indigestion! So then what? Pop an anti-acid tablet to make the heartburn go away? Not necessarily, in fact it is more than likely that you should be reaching for something acid *before* you eat, not something alkaline *after*!

The digestive tract is divided into different parts, each one functioning best at a different pH (the measure of acidity or alkalinity, with pH 7 being neutral, pHs below 7 being acidic and pHs above 7 being alkaline). Not surprisingly, the stomach works best at a very acid pH. Small glands throughout the stomach produce hydrochloric acid as well as special acid-activated enzymes to digest protein. When acid levels are low, the stomach

to the feeling of heartburn. Treating indigestion with anti-acids may work temporarily, but they will not get to the root of the problem.

Contrary to popular belief, stress often decreases the production of acid in the stomach because adrenaline, released in response to stress by the adrenal glands, tends to shut down the activity of the upper part of the digestive tract. In addition, as people age stomach acid production decreases. There are many important outcomes of this reduction in stomach acid production. (1) It is easier for "bad" bacteria to find their way into the colon, an area normally colonized by "good" bacteria that live in harmony with the body. (2) Protein is not digested properly and large protein molecules provide a food source for these "bad" bacteria and gas and toxins are an unpleasant side effect. These toxins can damage the gut lining and lead to "leaky gut" syndrome. (3) Calcium is not digested well in a low acid medium. (4) The same glands that produce acid also produce "intrinsic factor" which

is necessary for B12 absorption. If the glands are not producing acid, the chances are that they will not be producing intrinsic factor either. B12 deficiency can lead to a form of anemia with its most obvious symptom being fatigue.

So, you can see that it is very important to establish what is going on in the digestive tract before attempting any treatment. One of the first tests that I perform when a patient comes to see me with gas and bloating, with or without heartburn is a test for stomach acid levels. I also investigate the state of the colon with respect to the "bad" bacteria. Armed with this information it is possible to design a protocol specifically for the patient that comprises diet and lifestyle recommendations, supplementation, homeopathy, botanical medicine and acupuncture.

For further information on this issue or other health related topics please call me at The Guelph Naturopathic Healthcare Clinic at 827-9506.