

## Dis-Ease Does Not Have to Begin in the Gut: The Power of Eating Hygiene



Gas, bloating, distention, overly full after a meal, belching, mild reflux.... Not fun.

Some of our clients do indeed have major GI dysfunction which requires in-depth intervention. In many cases, however, our clients find MAJOR relief by simply adopting a few principles of what we call Eating Hygiene. We are sharing here some of our most helpful tips, and we hope you use them to get rid of your own GI frustrations. Don't be fooled by how simple these ideas seem at first; they are powerful!

**Slow Down.** Yes, we know: it's easier said than done at times. Especially if you were raised in a big family and couldn't have seconds (or dessert) until you practically inhaled what was on your plate. But digestion takes time. And digestive secretions such as stomach acid, bile, and pancreatic enzymes need time to be fully secreted. If we're stressed, it takes even longer!

- If you wolf down your meal in a hurry, a very full stomach has trouble mixing acid and enzymes well with your food. **All on its own, this dynamic creates indigestion.** Think of trying to blend a batch of stir-fry in a coffee cup. There's simply not enough room. When it "spills over", you belch and burp and may have reflux.
- **It also takes about 20 minutes for your gut to signal to your brain that you're full** and reduce your sense of hunger (courtesy of a hormone called CCK or cholecystikinin). Gulp down your food in 10 minutes? You're much more likely to overeat and end up feeling bloating 20 minutes later.
- Need help getting started? **Get in the habit of putting down your knife and fork and sitting back in your chair in between each bite of food.** Heck, spice it up and have a little conversation without food in your mouth. 😊 After you swallow, take at least one full, cleansing breath before you pick up your utensils and enjoy another bite.

**Chew.** Believe it or not, on average we chew a bite of food only about 6 times before we swallow (gulp!). Chewing is the only part of the digestive process that is voluntary – that we control.

- **The less we chew our food, the harder our GI tract has to work.** This creates post-meal fatigue. Ideally, we chew our food until it's almost liquid before swallowing. This can reduce gas and increase post-meal energy.
- When we swallow chunks of food (vs. tiny, mostly liquefied bits), it's harder for digestive enzymes in the intestines to do their job. When carbohydrate foods hang around too long, the bacteria in our guts feast too heartily and create gas build-up as a metabolic byproduct. **The result? Distention, bloating, flatulence.** (Hint: if you Chew thoroughly, it's also much easier to Slow Down.)
- Need help getting started? **Count your chews. Literally. Chew every bite 20-30 times, except perhaps soups and other delicate foods.** Again, we ideally chew food until its liquid. If you feel a strong impetus to swallow beforehand, just move the food to the side of your mouth, swallow saliva, and keep chewing (think of what you automatically do with gum).

**Prioritize Eating.** Many people feel that eating is somehow a waste of time unless it's done while multi-tasking. A fascinating choice when you consider that eating is the one thing we do which literally creates our future body! We get in the habit of eating "on the go" e.g. in the car rushing to a meeting, while walking to another building, or standing up at the counter while preparing our kids' food. All of these are a recipe for Indigestion. A high-impact way to live on purpose is to treat a meal as a special, singular event.

- **Sit down.** When we eat in a way that doesn't allow our nervous system to fully relax and move into parasympathetic mode, we literally put out less digestive fluids. It's part of the body's survival mechanism. We either ask the body to focus and rush and perform (e.g. "fight or flight"). Or we ask it to take a break and build strength and energy for the future via eating (e.g.

“rest and digest”). The body cannot do both at once. Witness the diarrhea or nausea many people feel in a stressful situation. Communicate to your body with your actions that it’s safe to relax and let down our guard and focus on digestion and restoring our reserves.

- **Breathe.** The body needs oxygen to properly digest. Help calm your body and support digestion by taking a few, slow, calming breaths when you sit down to a meal – before you start eating.
- **Relax and Savor.** Try to learn to just be in the moment with your food. Colors, textures, aromas, flavors... Most of us are mentally “elsewhere” while we eat. The result? The brain tends to miss out on the entertainment, and we are much more likely to overeat. Distraction increases food intake. Postpone stressful discussions, replying to tense emails, or paying bills until later.
- Need help getting started? **Plan your meals.** For many people, it helps to put them literally in your daily appointment/commitment calendar. This ensures the time is truly “set aside” to care for yourself via mindful eating.

**Don’t Drink too much during meals.** Yes, we need to be hydrated and focus on plain, clean water intake for overall wellness. However, **the best time to hydrate is in between meals.**

- When you consume *large* amounts of water during a meal, you **dilute the acidity of your stomach acid and slow digestion.** Depending on your sensitivity, this can cause an early sense of fullness and belching and long-term can cause malnutrition (especially low Vitamin B12, magnesium or iron).
- If it’s near meal-time and you feel thirsty, make a point of drinking a large glass of water right away. Then allow your body to absorb it while you are in transit to your meal or while you prepare it (ideally 20+ minutes before eating). This allows the water to clear your stomach before its digestive duty begins. Ideally, get in the habit of **carrying a water glass or bottle around with you throughout the day and sip on it regularly.**

These are indeed simple solutions! But don’t underestimate how powerful they can be. We have seen many clients dramatically improve their digestion, energy, and nutrition with these steps.

Given our stress-crazed, achievement-obsessed, go-go-go society, however, it can be hard to implement these principles *consistently*. But you can do it! **Like anything else, it just has to be a priority.** We recommend printing out a copy of this article and keeping it on your dining table. Repetition and persistence can create Big Change and long-term relief.