

Natural Ways to Prevent and Reverse Autoimmune Illness

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As a follow up to our look at the root causes of autoimmune illness, this post reviews several natural ways to protect yourself against autoimmune illness. In some cases, I've found that the steps outlined below can actually reverse some of the degenerative changes that can accompany various autoimmune illnesses.

Give Your Digestive Tract a Chance to Heal

Think of your digestive tract as your first physical line of defense against autoimmune illness, or any degenerative illness for that matter. From your mouth to your rectal pouch, the lining of your digestive tract is continuous with the skin that covers your body. This technically makes your digestive tract lining similar to your outer skin in the sense that it acts as a barrier that protects your blood and inner tissues against undesirable substances in your environment. Once the lining of your digestive tract begins to break down, if your genetic programming allows for it, you will begin to experience the antigen-antibody complex formation that occurs whenever incompletely digested protein leaks through your damaged digestive tract into your blood. The same goes for exogenous toxins like synthetic chemicals found in cosmetic products.

If you are suffering from an autoimmune condition, chances are good that your digestive tract is not as healthy as it can be, and that the effects of "leaky gut syndrome" and the formation of antigen-antibody complexes are contributing to your current symptoms.

How can you know with reasonable certainty that your digestive tract lining is not as healthy as possible? Leaky gut syndrome is not recognized by conventional medicine as a health condition, most likely because there are no clear-cut drugs or surgical procedures that can justifiably be prescribed for it. The loss of lining integrity that we are talking about is microscopic, which doesn't make it any less harmful than it is. In general, you can safely assume that your digestive tract lining is in need of significant repair if you have symptoms of an autoimmune illness and you have one or more of the following symptoms of digestive tract dysfunction:

- Excessive, foul-smelling gas production
- Ill-defined discomfort in your abdomen following meals or even during meals
- Chronic constipation and/or diarrhea

So how do you go about restoring the health of your digestive tract?

First, recognize that your body's self-healing mechanisms are already hard at work to repair any damage that exists within your body, including within your digestive tract. Just as your body predictably works to heal a cut on your skin the moment the cut is created, your body is constantly on the alert for trouble spots throughout your body and will always work to repair damaged areas. The difference between your digestive tract and your skin is that you can see your skin and clearly determine if your daily choices are helping or hindering your self-healing mechanisms as they work to repair a cut.

Put another way, it is easy for you to see that when you keep a cut on your skin clean and protected against abrasive objects, your body can almost always successfully restore it to health. But when it comes to your digestive tract, it is not as easy for you to know how your daily food and lifestyle choices are helping or hindering your body's attempt to heal damaged areas.

If you could see with your eyes how a specific food that you ate over lunch – say a hot dog or a turkey sub – was putting stress on your digestive tract lining and preventing it from making progress in healing, you would certainly be well motivated to avoid such foods. Similarly, it isn't obvious to your eyes how other foods, lack of rest, emotional stress, and other lifestyle factors are affecting the health status of your digestive tract.

The good news is that you can learn – from this post and by listening to your body's signals – how to best support healing of your digestive tract. And once your daily food and lifestyle choices consistently support your body's ongoing efforts to restore the health of your digestive tract, recovery of your health is well within your reach. When you want a cut on your skin to heal as quickly as possible, you know that you must do the best you can not to disturb that area. Leave it alone and let your healing mechanisms do exactly what they are well designed to do all the time. This same principle applies to healing your digestive tract: leave it alone as much as possible. Do not give it any unnecessary stress. Which takes us to our next major point...

Adopt Eating Habits that Facilitate Optimal Digestion

Perhaps the single most important eating habit that you can adopt to facilitate healing of your digestive tract is to chew your foods thoroughly. Ideally, you want to chew your foods until liquid. When you chew well, you allow your digestive tract to efficiently break down small particles of food into micronutrients that can pass through the wall of your small intestine into your blood. Your teeth are designed to mechanically break down food, while the rest of your digestive tract and organs are designed to chemically break down your food. Whenever you do not chew well, your digestive tract and organs take on the burden of trying to accomplish what is much easier for your teeth to accomplish. If you have dental or jaw problems that make it difficult to chew well, consider blending your foods in a blender or a food processor. Chewing your foods and liquids well allows your saliva and digestive enzymes to mix in with your foods and liquids, and begins the process of digestion right in your mouth. Chewing well encourages physical and emotional rest while eating. And being emotionally balanced and at rest while you eat allows your body to send a rich supply of blood to your digestive organs during a meal, which helps to optimize every step of digestion.

If possible, strive to combine the habit of chewing well with a steady focus on feelings of gratitude for your food and other blessings. Just as the connection between your mind and body can cause you to sweat when you are nervous, having a feeling of gratitude while you chew your food can help your digestive organs break down your food and assimilate nutrients into your blood. Once you condition yourself to chew well and to eat with a grateful heart, the next habit to adopt to promote optimal digestive tract health is to...

Avoid Eating More Protein than You Need

As mentioned previously, a significant cause of autoimmune illness is the formation of antigen-antibody complexes that can float around in your blood and get deposited into your tissues, which can cause inflammation and accompanying discomfort. A chief cause of formation of such immune complexes is the leakage of incompletely digested protein into your blood. Chewing your food well will certainly help to minimize the amount of undigested protein that can make it into your blood. But to stay optimally well, it is equally important to avoid eating more protein than your body needs.

In general, it is best to eat no more than half of your body weight of protein, in grams, per day. This means that if you weigh 150 pounds, you should strive to eat no more than about 75 grams of protein per day. A three-ounce piece of beef, chicken, or fish contains approximately 25 grams of protein, and three ounces of meat equates to a serving size that is about the size of a regular deck of cards. But don't forget that every food that you eat, including fruits and vegetables, contains protein. So if you eat three ounces of animal-based protein for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you are almost certainly eating more than 75 grams of protein per day.

A cup of broccoli, cooked spinach, or corn contains approximately 5 grams of protein.

A cup of peas contains over 8 grams of protein.

Even a medium-sized potato contains almost 5 grams of protein.

If you eat plenty of vegetables and legumes, it is not difficult to get enough protein to be optimally healthy without eating any animal foods at all. I am not suggesting that you need to be a strict vegan for the long-term to recover from and prevent autoimmune illness. Rather, I am striving to illustrate how easy it is to eat more protein than you need, which is a critical mistake when addressing autoimmune illness.

My clinical experiences have led me to believe that animal-based protein, especially when cooked at high temperatures, tends to contribute to antigen-antibody complex formation in people with autoimmune illness more easily than plant-based protein. To best support recovery from autoimmune illness over the long-term, I recommend eating no more than one three-ounce serving of animal-based protein per day, cooked using a low temperature technique, such as steaming or boiling. If possible, I even recommend staying away from all animal-based protein for a period of six months to give your digestive tract complete rest from having to digest animal protein. During such a time, it is best to avoid eating large amounts of protein-dense plant foods as well, such as nuts, seeds, and legumes. So long as you eat plenty of vegetables, especially green ones like broccoli, lettuce, and cabbage, you will get plenty of protein for your daily needs.

After six months of avoiding animal protein and going light on protein-dense plant foods, you can gradually increase your protein intake until you are eating approximately one gram of protein per day for every two pounds of your body weight, with no more than one major serving of animal-based protein.

Now that we have emphasized how important it is to avoid over-consumption of protein, let's take a close look at how you can choose to...

Eat Foods that Optimally Nourish and Cause Little to No Harm

The best food groups for preventing and reversing autoimmune illness are vegetables, whole grains, and fruits. Ideally, you want to eat just these food groups (with perhaps very small amounts of legumes) for a period of six months to give your body the rest and nutrients that it needs to best support a full recovery.

Eat a fresh salad every day that includes plenty of dark green lettuces and colorful vegetables like tomatoes, carrots, bell peppers, shredded zucchini, and shredded red beets. For concentrated healthy fat intake, add an avocado, as well as a simple salad dressing made out of extra virgin olive oil, lemon

juice, sea salt, and a touch of honey if you like a little sweetness to your dressings. Steamed vegetables are also an excellent food group for overcoming autoimmune illness. You can eat a lot more broccoli, kale, Swiss chard, red beets, and other hardy vegetables when they are steamed than you can when they are raw. Steaming such foods can actually help you extract more nutrients out of them. Steaming can also soften the fiber found in these foods, which can be helpful if your digestive tract is sensitive to large amounts of raw fiber. Try eating steamed vegetables with healthy salad dressings or even soups that can serve as nourishing and flavorful sauces.

You can make vegetable soups by boiling vegetables and then running them and the water that they are boiled in through a blender or food processor. Eating vegetables in their raw state allows you to benefit from naturally occurring enzymes that are destroyed with cooking. Eating vegetables that are steamed or boiled allows you to eat more of them and extract more nutrients out of them than you can when they are raw. So eating *both* raw and cooked vegetables positively diversifies your intake of health-promoting nutrients.

Freshly pressed vegetable juices provide intact enzymes, and because they are nutrients that have already been extracted from fibrous vegetables, they provide a concentrated batch of nutrients that are readily absorbed into your system and able to nourish your cells. If possible, do your best to include at least one freshly pressed vegetable juice in your diet on a daily basis.

Whole grains like brown rice, millet, quinoa, buckwheat, and oats can provide you with plenty of complex carbohydrates that can take care of the bulk of your daily caloric needs. Whole grains are also rich in B vitamins and a wide variety of minerals. Just be sure to soak whole grains in water for at least a few hours, preferably overnight, before cooking. Doing so makes whole grains easier to digest and also prevents potential problems with mineral absorption. The bran of whole grains contains a substance called phytic acid, which can bind onto calcium, iron, zinc, magnesium, and phosphorous in your digestive tract, preventing them from entering your blood. Soaking whole grains helps to neutralize phytic acid and prevent such binding from occurring in your digestive tract.

As is the case with salads and steamed vegetables, adding healthy dressings and sauces to whole grains can make them an enjoyable staple in your diet.

Fruits are also a good choice for autoimmune illness, but you have to be careful about not eating more fruits than vegetables. While certain fruits like berries, grapes, pomegranates, watermelon, and mangos are concentrated in health-promoting antioxidants, most fruits have a lot more carbohydrates and naturally occurring sugar (fructose) than they do antioxidants. Actually, the majority of health-promoting nutrients found in fruits are in their skins and seeds. So when eating fruits, choose varieties that are rich in color and, whenever possible, try to eat their skins and seeds. Excellent choices include blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, pomegranates, mangos, papayas, apples, watermelon, cantaloupe, and some of the "super foods" that are becoming more popular with each passing day, such as goji berries.

Keep in mind that it is always better to eat fresh fruits rather than dried fruits. Dried fruits are heavily concentrated in natural sugars that can put stress on your blood sugar-regulating mechanisms, which can increase your risk of suffering from diabetes and other forms of cardiovascular disease.

Now let's take a look at a three suggestions related to lifestyle choices that are not related to your diet...

Ensure Adequate Physical Rest

Do not overlook the importance of getting adequate physical rest as you seek to recover from autoimmune illness. Simply put, the more you rest, the more energy your body can devote to repairing damaged areas, including your digestive tract.

What's most important is to get deep, restful sleep each night. It is during deep, restful sleep that your body produces large quantities of hormones that are directly or indirectly responsible for facilitating healing and growth of your tissues. These hormones are growth hormone, testosterone, and erythropoietin. Your body produces these hormones in small quantities while you are awake and active, but in order to produce them in optimal quantities for healing moderate to severe degrees of autoimmune illness, you need deep, restful sleep on a regular basis.

Ensure Adequate Exposure to Natural Sunlight

Ensuring adequate vitamin D status is extremely important to treating and preventing autoimmune illness. The safest way to ensure adequate vitamin D status is to regularly expose your skin to sunlight without getting burned. UV-B rays in sunlight can convert cholesterol that is found in your skin to natural vitamin D. Amazingly, once you produce enough vitamin D through this mechanism, your body will not manufacture additional vitamin D until you need more, even with continued exposure to sunlight. This natural "stop" mechanism is important because you do not want to have more vitamin D than your body needs on a moment-to-moment basis; vitamin D is fat-soluble, and can therefore be stored to levels that are toxic to your body.

When sunlight is not regularly available, as is the case in the northern hemisphere throughout the late fall, winter, and early spring months, it is important to ensure adequate vitamin D intake through foods that are naturally rich in vitamin D. Although some commercially available foods like pasteurized dairy and some cereals are fortified with synthetic vitamin D, it is best to eat foods that are naturally abundant in vitamin D. Foods that are naturally rich in vitamin D include wild salmon, sardines, cod liver oil, and organic egg yolks.

Get Clear on *Why* You Want To Be Well

Have you ever experienced a frightful dream that was so real that you woke up with a pounding heart or a coat of sweat on your skin? Have you ever experienced a gush of saliva in your mouth while thinking about eating something tart like a fresh lemon?

These and other everyday experiences are proof that your thoughts and emotions can create real physical change throughout your body. Every single thought and emotion that you experience triggers countless chemical reactions throughout your body via your nervous and endocrine systems.

In recognizing how powerful your mind-body connection is, you can harness its power as you seek to recover from and prevent autoimmune illness. Every time you strongly believe that you will experience a full recovery, your body moves towards that reality. Every time you start feeling sorry for yourself and believe that you will never be free of autoimmune illness, your illness becomes more deeply rooted in your physiology.

Harnessing your mind-body connection to facilitate a full recovery goes way beyond repeating affirmations to yourself, telling yourself that you believe you will be well. Affirmations are important and useful, but they must come from a place of genuine strength and conviction. Using your thoughts and emotions to be well must begin with a careful evaluation of your core life values, beliefs, and desires.