

Stop Belly Aching

When food causes more than a stomachache

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Food baby, food coma and food hangover are all phrases people use when they've punished their bodies with overindulgence. These uncomfortable sensations typically pass within a few hours, but food could be the cause of other, more enduring forms of discomfort as well.

People who experience extended irritation following food consumption aren't necessarily allergic to certain foods. In fact, food intolerance is much more common than food allergies are, with lactose intolerance alone affecting about 10 percent of Americans, according to the Cleveland Clinic. All food allergies, on the other hand, affect only 1 percent of adults and 7 percent of children, as some children outgrow their allergies.

The body can be intolerant of all types of foods, and this intolerance paired with the consumption of over-processed, non-nutritious foods can cause a range of undesirable symptoms.

"The soil that our food is grown in is just so depleted now," says Dr. Lauren Noel, naturopathic doctor at Shine Natural Medicine, Solana Beach, California. "Even with good organic, local food, our food just isn't as nutritious as it once was."

When someone is eating a poor, non-nutritious diet full of refined grains and sugars and bad fats, his or her microbiome (all the bacteria within the gut) will become imbalanced, causing the gut barrier to eventually break down and allow certain proteins through that normally wouldn't and shouldn't be allowed through. This is referred to as "leaky gut syndrome," and can really mess with the immune system, says Dr. Chad Larson, adviser and consultant on clinical consulting team for Cyrex Laboratories, Phoenix.

Two of the biggest intruders of the gut barrier are gluten and dairy. When gluten, dairy or another offender gets past the barrier, the immune system starts producing antibodies to try to neutralize it. This autoimmune reaction often causes inflammation, which contributes to symptoms like chronic pain and headaches, aching joints, tiredness and brain fog.

"That's a miserable way to exist – being in that kind of pain all the time," Dr. Larson says.

Of course, chronic pain could occur for a variety of reasons like arthritis or a pinched nerve. To determine if diet is the culprit, people should either go to a doctor for blood work or take matters into their own hands by eliminating certain foods one at a time and noting any improvements.

This elimination method is often effective because, although genetics does play a small role in food sensitivities (about 30 percent, Dr. Larson says), dietary and environmental factors are the biggest causes of these uncomfortable symptoms.

"I kind of see genetics as the card you're dealt with, but your lifestyle is how you play your card," Dr. Noel says.

With regard to leaky gut syndrome, problem foods include inflammatory foods like refined sugars, dairy, gluten, alcohol and artificial sweeteners. Avoiding these foods while eating more of anti-inflammatory foods like fish, nuts and leafy greens should help reduce the symptoms associated with leaky gut and a poor diet – if, of course, diet is to blame.