

# Yoga For Digestive Health

With Kristen Butera

*“Whatsoever beings live on this earth, truly they are born from food, also they remain alive on food alone and in the same way they return to it at the end. Food is, verily, the first among all that is created, therefore it is said to be the medicine for all. One who meditates on food as Brahman, surely obtains all food.”*

- Taittiriya Upanishad, 2:1

## The Mind-Body Link:

Ancient yogis understood that good digestion is key to radiant health.

- The digestive system is a very sensitive mirror of the mind, solely under the influence of the autonomic nervous system, governed by the limbic area of the brain
- The digestive process is governed by the autonomic nervous system, largely under our subconscious control
- Emotions and mental processes act directly on the limbic area of the brain and via the nervous system, they affect the stomach and digestive organs
- The parasympathetic nervous system (dominant in a relaxed state) turns on digestive juices, speeds up peristalsis and opens the sphincters

*“The mind is like a sea, the body is the land and their sphere of interaction is the shore. When the mind is peaceful and relaxed, the sea is calm. When the mind is troubled the sea become turbulent and waves beat against the shore, tearing away large sections of the land. This is the psychosomatic process that results in indigestion, constipation, ulcers, diarrhea and other major and minor diseases.”*

## Yoga and The Nutrient Cycle

- When you press an area of the skin, it turns first paler, as the blood is pushed away, and then red as it rushes back. This is how yoga poses work on tissues, like a hand slowly and gently squeezing a sponge to remove all the stale, waste-bearing fluids, and then stretching the tissue to allow new life-giving nutrients and energy to circulate into the cells.
- Breathing deeply in poses sends more oxygen to the cells, and removes carbon-dioxide
- Yoga poses also massage the vital organs, and stimulate the digestive muscles to increase their peristalsis.
- The health of the body depends on the health of its living cells
- Cells are the building blocks of the tissues and organs whose diverse functions are vital to our well-being
- Cells and tissues need a proper environment for health, free of toxins, rich in the necessary supplies of nutrients, and with an efficient communication system.

- Each cell needs to obtain oxygen as fuel for its work, and to get rid of waste carbon dioxide quickly.
- By eating the right food for you, at correct times of a day, you will have healthy digestions, and the blood will absorb and excrete waste products thoroughly.

## **The Digestive System -- An Overview**

What is digestion?

- At its simplest, the digestive system is a tube running from mouth to anus
- Its chief goal is to break down huge macromolecules (proteins, fats and starch) which cannot be absorbed intact, into smaller molecules (amino acids, fatty acids and glucose) that can be absorbed across the wall of the tube and into the circulatory system for dissemination throughout the body

How does food move through the digestive system?

In a wave-like movement, called peristalsis, muscles propel food and liquid along the digestive tract. In general, there are four steps in the process of moving food and liquid through the digestive system:

Digestion involves:

- Mastication/Ingestion: taking in and chewing/mixing of food
- Digestion: the movement of food through the digestive track in combination with a chemical breakdown of large molecules of food into smaller molecules
- Absorption: nutrients become available to all cells in the body and are utilized by the body cells in metabolism
- Elimination: the removal on indigestible waste in the form of feces

Chewing food properly:

Digestion begins in the mouth, where food and liquids are taken in and, and is completed in the small intestine. Chewing food properly is important – enzymes in the saliva start the process of food breaking down.

What is included in the digestive system?

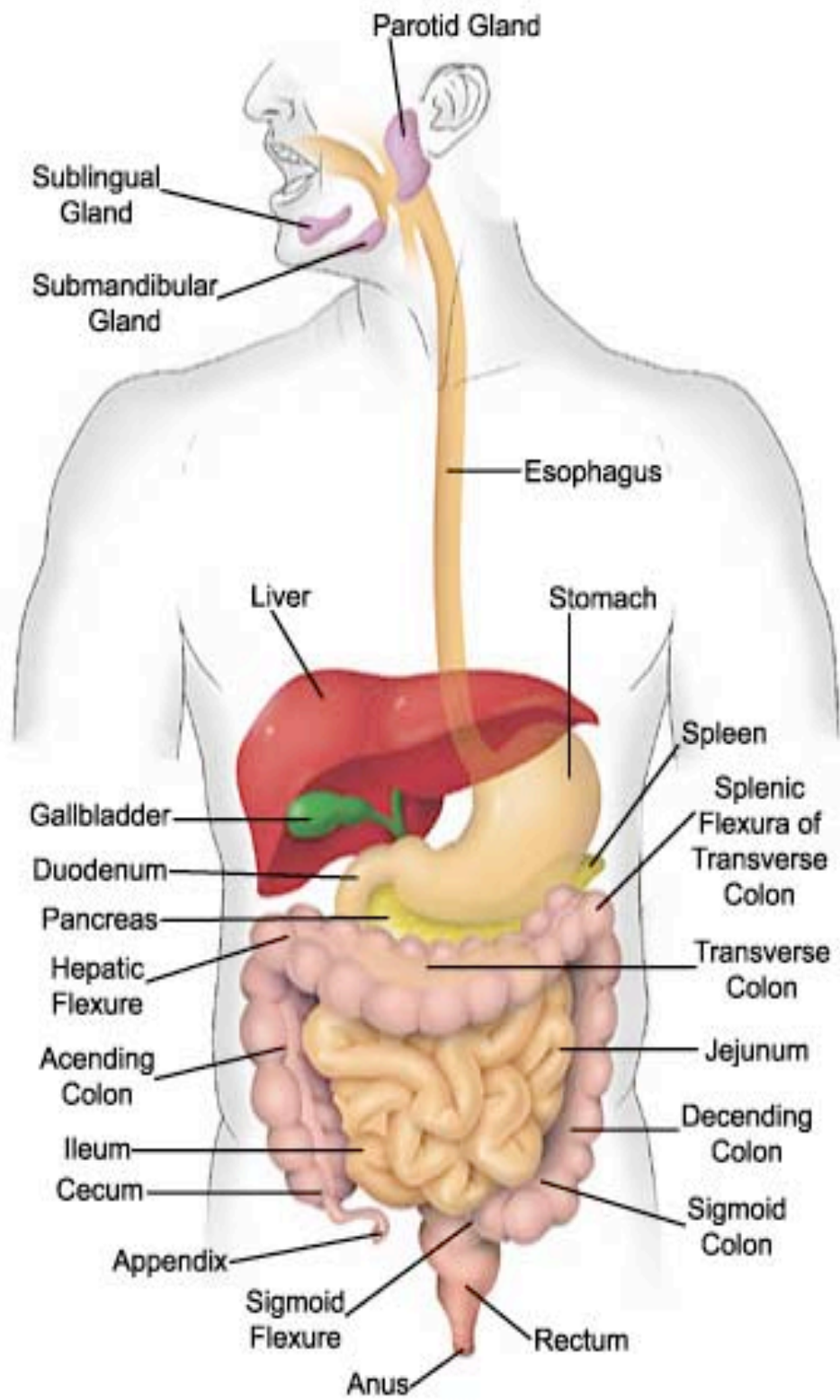
The digestive system is made up of the digestive tract and other organs that aid in digestion. The digestive tract is a series of hollow organs joined in a long, twisting tube from the mouth to the anus, consisting of the following:

- Mouth
- Esophagus
- Stomach
- Small intestine

- Large intestine
- Rectum
- Anus

Organs that help with digestion, but are not part of the digestive tract include:

- Tongue
- Glands in the mouth that make saliva
- Pancreas
- Liver
- Gallbladder
- Parts of other organ systems, such as nerves and blood, also play a major role in the digestive process.



## **Digestive Sadhana/Eating as Meditation**

### **Before Eating:**

- Come to the table relaxed and with awareness, practice deep breathing to become more relaxed if necessary. Breath should be slow and rhythmical while eating.

### **During a Meal:**

- When commencing a meal, remain aware of your body, breath and mind. Imagine that you are eating with your favorite deity, teacher or simply your higher self. Try to sit in easy pose or if you are in a chair, try not to cross your legs to let energy flow freely into the abdomen. Remain fully aware of the process of chewing and swallowing. Each taste, temperature and texture should be fully experienced.

### **After Eating:**

- Remain aware that the food has passed down into your stomach and the digestive process is underway.

### **After Meal Practice:**

- Rest on your left side for five minutes after eating
- Focus on opening the right nostril to create increased digestive fire

### **Meditations for Digestion:**

- Sit in hero pose or easy pose and try to become aware of your digestive tract. Visualize the digestive tract in your abdomen and become fully aware of all of its movements and sensations. Use your knowledge of anatomy to visualize ideal digestion in progress in your body.
- Focus on the natural rhythm of your breath in the abdomen. The more relaxed and aware you are, the better your digestion will be.
- Visualize the sun with its center at your navel, radiating power throughout the whole of the body. Feel its warmth digesting the food and sending prana and nutrients to different parts of your body.

### **Relaxing the Abdomen:**

Tension at the emotional, mental or spiritual level is reflected in the body. Main areas of tension typically include the jaw, neck, shoulders, lower back and abdomen. There are 2 simple and effective exercises to prevent and cure digestive disorders.

### **Tadagi Mudra: Barrelled Abdomen Technique**

This mudra relaxes tension the abdominal region. Air increased pressure in the abdominal cavity and stimulates the abdominal nerve plexus and organs, which enhances lymphatic drainage. Manipura chakra, which governs digestive fire, is stimulated.

- Sit with legs outstretched and grasp the thighs, shins or big toes with both hands
- Inhale as deeply as is comfortable (the chest and abdomen are fully expanded)
- Retain the breath and focus on the abdominal muscles (which are pushed as far forward as possible)
- Exhale and relax the abdomen
- Repeat up to 10 times

### **Manipura Shuddhi:**

This exercise clears tension and stimulates solar plexus power and adrenal gland function – good for indigestion.

- Using a 3 part breath, inhale through the navel and straight back to manipura chakra, located in the spinal cord
- Retain the breath and repeat the bija (seed) mantra *Ram* three times
- Exhale, moving the breath plus the awareness forward and out of the navel
- Continue to practice with awareness of the breath moving in and out of the navel center and the rhythmic expansion and contraction of the abdomen.

### **Yoga Breathing Exercises for Digestive Health:**

Breathing exercises that aim to stimulate and increase the vital energy of the body by directing it specific areas for special purposes, including healing.

**Abdominal Breathing:** Stimulates peristalsis and relaxes the abdomen, essentially giving the practitioner and abdominal massage

- Can be performed sitting, laying down or standing
- Slowly inhale, expanding the belly out like a balloon
- Exhale, relax the belly back towards the spine

**Kapalabhati Breathing (Breath of Fire):** Stimulates sluggish digestion

- Forceful exhale, passive inhale
- Inhale naturally and then exhale through the nose, as if you are trying to dry out water from your nostrils or expel a fly sitting on the tip of your nose
- Let the inhale come passively from the exhale (abdomen region)
- Rounds of 20 (exhale and inhale counts as one round)

**Bashtrika Pranayama (Bellows Breath):** A powerful and cleansing and clearing technique

- Inhale through your nose with arms lifted
- Exhale strongly and powerfully bring arm bent and tucked by your side

### **Mudras/Bandhas for Digestive Health:**

**Ashwini Mudra (Horse Seal):** Helps to relax the muscles surrounding the anus and stimulate the elimination process

- Sit in a comfortable meditation pose or a comfortable squatting pose

- Contract the sphincter muscles of the anus for a few seconds (without straining) then relax for a few seconds
- Inhale with the contraction and exhale with the relaxation
- Repeat the practice for as long as is comfortable – the contraction and relaxation should be smooth and rhythmic

**Uddiyana Bandha (Abdominal Lock): Bring awareness and prana into the abdomen**

- In a meditative pose, place hands on the knees
- Close the eyes and relax the whole body
- Breathe in deeply through the nostrils and then exhale, emptying the lungs as much as possible
- Lean forward and press down on the knees with the palms
- Straighten the elbows and raise the shoulders
- Press the chin against the chest
- Contract the abdominal muscles upward and inward
- Hold the lock and with the breath out for as long as possible without straining
- Release the lock and inhale, with the exhale repeat the lock or let respiration return to normal

**Stomach Pumping: Stimulates digestive fire** (contraindicated for hyper-digestion)

- From a relaxed standing position, place hands on thighs with knees slightly bent
- Inhale partially, let the belly expand
- Holding the breath in, rhythmically pump the muscles of the stomach 5 – 10 times
- Exhale, hold the breath out and engage in Uddiyana Bandha
- With the next inhale repeat stomach pump
- Do in rounds of 5 (1 round is a pump and a hold) and work up from there

**How a Healthy Abdomen Feels:**

- As you lightly touch your belly, it should be the same temperature everywhere or slightly warmer below the navel
- Above the navel should have a looser, softer feeling, while below should be more resilient and springy
- The entire abdomen should feel elastic, not tight or tense
- There should be a slight dip around the navel, and another about midway between the navel and the breast bone
- The navel should have a uniform shape and indent smoothly into the abdomen
- There should not be any hardness, puffiness, or pain when pressing, even relatively deeply
- With deeper pressure, you will feel a pulse around the navel. The pulse should not be too strong, or over a large area; and it should not be visible
- If you find any imbalances, then focus on massaging those areas of your abdomen
- Pay particular attention to the areas that cause pain elsewhere in the body, especially where you have a symptom already

**Self-Abdominal Massage:** This type of self-massage is best used first thing in the morning or at least 2 hours after a meal. It improves digestion and elimination. Also helpful to women who are suffering from menstrual cramps.

- Lay on your back with your knees bent and place one hand over the other as they lay above your naval
- Breathe deeply as your move your hands together in a circular-motion around your belly in a clock-wise direction (the clock-wise direction is synchronous with the digestive pathway of your colon)
- Repeat this motion for several minutes focusing your mind on your hands and breathe to warm your abdomen and improve circulation.

**Early Morning Abdominal Massage:** Aids in digestion, absorption and elimination

- From a comfortable seated position place your right fist two inches below your navel, then move the fist two inches to the right on the right
- Grab your right elbow with your left hand and let your left elbow rest over top of your right fist
- Take a big abdominal inhale, and with the exhale fold forward, gently pressing the right fist into the abdomen
- Keeping the fist in place, create a circular motion, continuing to gently press into the belly
- Inhale, come up and move the fist two inches to the right, repeat
- Follow the line of the ascending and descending colon, moving clockwise in around the abdomen with the fist



**Yoga for Common Digestive Disorders:**

### **Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)**

- The most common gastro-intestinal disorder is the Irritable Bowel Syndrome or IBS that affects about 30 percent of world population. This generally affects the large intestine and is characterized by cramping, bloating, gas, diarrhea and constipation.
- IBS is a functional disorder wherein the nerves and muscles in the large intestine (bowel) become extra-sensitive.
- Though IBS does not really cause any damage to internal organs, it causes great deal of suffering and anxiety.
- Stress is one of the factors that trigger IBS symptoms. Food, exercise, and hormones may also trigger IBS symptoms. Foods like milk products, chocolate,



caffeine, carbonated drinks, alcohol, and food with high fat content can also trigger symptoms.

**Heartburn or Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)**

- Also known as acid indigestion, this occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) does not close properly and the stomach contents reflux or return into the esophagus. This may create a burning sensation in the chest or throat when the refluxed stomach acid touches the lining of the esophagus.
- The burning sensation is the one called Heartburn. Occasional Heartburn does not necessarily mean that one has GERD, but Heartburns that occurs more than twice a week may be considered as GERD and may lead to more serious health problems.
- People suffering from heartburn may experience pain in the chest, hoarseness in the morning or trouble swallowing instead. Bad breath and dry cough may also be a result of GERD.

**Yoga Pose Sequence for Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Heartburn:**



**Easy Pose**

Easy Pose helps to straighten the spine, slow down metabolism, promote inner tranquility and keep the mind still.



**Cat Pose**

The Cat Yoga Pose helps to initiate movement from the center of the body and to coordinate movement and breath.



**Dog Pose**

The Dog Pose improves flexibility of the spine, stretches the hips and middle and low back, rejuvenates the body, and helps in preventing back problems.



**Half Spinal Twist**

If done properly, the Half Spinal Twist lengthens and strengthens the spine. It is also beneficial for the liver, kidneys, as well as adrenal glands.



**Wind Relieving Pose**

The term Pawanamuktasana comes from the Sanskrit word 'pavana' which means air or wind and 'mukta' which means freedom or release. This pose helps to release excess gas in the stomach.



**Corpse Pose**

Aids in relaxation and creates a sense of general well-being in the body.

**Yoga Poses for Specific Digestive Symptoms**

Symptom	Yoga Pose
Constipation	Bow, Corpse Pose, Fish Pose, On your Back With Knees

	to Chest, Seated Forward Bend, Uddiyana Bandha, Forward Bend, Plow
<b>Diarrhea</b>	Breath of Fire, Spinal Twists, Triangle, Standing Forward Bend (with legs open to mat distance)
<b>Gas</b>	On Your Back With Knees to Chest, Wind Relieving Posture, Gentle Inversion Poses
<b>Bloating</b>	Gentle Inversion Poses, Wind Relieving Posture, Seated Wide Angle Pose
<b>Uneven Bowels</b>	Locust or Half Locust Pose
<b>Indigestion</b>	Corpse Pose, Mountain, Locust, Seated Forward Bend, Cobra or Upward Facing Dog, Forward and Backward Bends, Side bends
<b>Overall GI Function</b>	Spinal twists, Triangle, Bow, Cobra or Upward Facing Dog, Forward Bend, Plow, Camel
<b>Backache</b>	Corpse Pose, Locust, On Your Back with Knees to Chest

### Constipation vs. Diarrhea with Yoga Poses

It is important to note that there are different poses that are good for constipation versus diarrhea.

**Constipation:** Master yogis suggest that if you suffer from constipation and do a daily forward folding practice for a week, you will see an immediate and marked increase in bowel activity.

**Diarrhea:** If you are in an active state of diarrhea, it is best not to practice intense forward folds (such as seated forward folds.) These poses will increase the downward flow of energy and may increase the flow of bowel activity.

#### Contraindications:

- Deep forward bends are generally not recommended for those who suffer chronic pain and diarrhea from inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn's disease and Ulcerative colitis.
- Extreme twisting poses should also be practiced with some caution in those who have a history of bowel obstruction.
- If you are new to yoga and suffer from Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis or other serious digestive problems, consult a doctor before starting.

**Motion of Twisting:**

- Twisting to the left first and then to right will slow the movement of bowels out the intestine
- Twisting to the right first and then the left will increase the movement of the bowels

**Food Considerations:**

Yogis categorize food according to its qualities and influence on the body and mind:

Sattvic = pure, harmonious, clear, balanced, peaceful  
(Foods: whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, herbs, beans, yogurt and milk)

Rajasic = aggressive, restless, fiery, passionate  
(Cheese, eggs, fish, poultry, meat and strong spices)

Tamasic = lazy, lethargic, dark, ignorant  
(Processed foods, sugar, candy, caffeine, alcohol, fried foods, white flour)

People seeking relaxation and good digestive health should eat Sattvic foods to give rise to a balanced and harmonious sense of wellbeing in both body and mind. Sattvic are pure foods that digest easily and support the health of the digestive organs.

Awareness is always an important aspect of Yoga and as your practices progresses you will develop a finer sense for how each food influences you physically and mentally.

**Pose Addendum****(Hypo) Indigestion/Constipation Posture Flow:**

1. Mountain Pose
2. Palm Tree
3. Triangle
4. Side Angle
5. Half Moon
6. Downward Dog
7. Standing Wide Angled Forward Fold
8. Standing Forward Fold
9. Hero's Pose
10. Seated Twist from Hero's Pose
11. Seated Twist from Crossed Legged Pose
12. Marichyasana Twist
13. Wide Angled Child's Pose
14. Head to Knee Pose
15. Seated forward Fold

16. Boat Pose
17. Shoulderstand
18. Plough
19. Reclined Bound Ankle Pose
20. Reclined Hero's Pose
21. Legs Against the Wall

**Hyper-Digestion (Diarrhea) Posture Flow:**

1. Reclined bound Ankle
2. Reclined Hero's Pose
3. Supported Shoulderstand
4. Reclined Hand to Big Toe Pose
5. Supported Fish Pose
6. Legs Against the Wall
7. Corpse Pose