

FOOD INTOLERANCES & ALLERGIES

HOW FOOD AFFECTS THE BODY

Understanding digestion, nutrition and individual responses

BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

My Thoughts

One of the biggest lessons I've learned over the years is that there is no such thing as the "perfect" diet.

If you've ever searched online for nutrition advice, you've probably come away feeling more confused than when you started.

One expert tells you to avoid carbohydrates.

Another tells you to eat more wholegrains.

One recommends dairy.

Another says avoid it.

Some people thrive on foods that make others feel unwell.

So who's right?

In reality, they all might be.

The human body is wonderfully complex, and no two people digest, absorb and respond to food in exactly the same way.

This is something I've become increasingly fascinated by, both personally and professionally. As someone who has lived with ARFID for most of my life, received an autism and ADHD diagnosis later in adulthood and later discovered my own food intolerances, I've come to appreciate just how individual our relationship with food really is.

As a psychotherapist, I also see another side of the story. Many people come to therapy feeling exhausted, anxious, mentally foggy or physically drained. Food isn't always the reason, but sometimes it forms part of a much bigger picture.

Understanding how our bodies work doesn't mean searching for one magic answer.

It means becoming curious about the many different factors that influence our health.

Digestion Is More Than Breaking Down Food

Most of us think digestion starts in the stomach.

In fact, it begins much earlier.

The sight, smell and even the thought of food prepares the digestive system for eating.

As we chew, enzymes in saliva begin breaking down carbohydrates.

Food then travels down the oesophagus into the stomach, where acid and digestive enzymes continue the process.

From there it moves into the small intestine, where nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream.

The liver, pancreas and gallbladder all play important roles by producing substances that help digest fats, proteins and carbohydrates.

Finally, anything the body doesn't absorb moves into the large intestine, where water is reabsorbed and the trillions of bacteria living within our gut continue their important work.

This entire process is happening every single day without us even thinking about it.

It's an extraordinary system.

Why Do People Respond to Foods Differently?

This is one of the questions I find most interesting.

Why can one person drink milk every day without any problems while another experiences bloating or stomach pain?

Why do some people feel energised after eating certain foods while others feel sluggish?

The answer isn't simple because many factors influence how we respond to food.

Our Genes

Each of us inherits a unique genetic blueprint.

Our genes influence everything from how we metabolise nutrients to how efficiently we produce certain digestive enzymes.

For example, many adults naturally produce less lactase, the enzyme needed to digest lactose found in milk. This is why lactose intolerance becomes more common with age.

Our Gut Microbiome

Inside our digestive system live trillions of bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms known collectively as the gut microbiome.

These microbes help digest food, produce vitamins, support our immune system and communicate with our brain through what scientists call the gut-brain axis.

Research into the microbiome is one of the most exciting areas of modern nutrition, but it's also one of the newest. Although we're learning more every year, many questions remain unanswered.

What we do know is that a diverse and balanced microbiome appears to play an important role in overall health.

Stress Changes Digestion

This is something I discuss regularly in therapy.

When we're stressed, our nervous system shifts into survival mode.

Blood flow is redirected towards our muscles and away from digestion.

Some people lose their appetite completely.

Others experience bloating, diarrhoea, constipation or stomach pain.

This doesn't necessarily mean food is the problem.

Sometimes it's our nervous system asking for support.

Understanding this distinction is incredibly important.

Hormones

Hormones influence digestion far more than many people realise.

Changes during puberty, pregnancy, the menstrual cycle and menopause can all affect appetite, bowel habits and how certain foods are tolerated.

I've spoken to many women who suddenly found foods they'd eaten comfortably for years no longer seemed to agree with them during perimenopause or menopause.

Again, this highlights why our bodies are constantly changing throughout life.

Sleep

Poor sleep affects much more than our energy levels.

It influences hunger hormones, food cravings, blood sugar regulation and digestion.

When we're sleep deprived, we're also more likely to reach for convenience foods because our brains are looking for quick sources of energy.

This doesn't mean we're lacking willpower.

It's biology.

Physical Activity

Movement supports digestion in many ways.

Regular physical activity helps stimulate bowel function, supports metabolic health and contributes to overall wellbeing.

That doesn't mean you need to spend hours in the gym.

Gentle walking after meals, stretching or simply moving throughout the day can all support healthy digestion.

Medication

Some medications affect appetite, digestion or nutrient absorption.

Others may cause constipation, diarrhoea or nausea.

If you've noticed changes after starting a new medication, it's worth discussing this with your GP or pharmacist rather than assuming food is responsible.

Neurodivergence and Food

This is an area particularly close to my heart.

Many autistic people and people with ADHD experience differences in eating that have nothing to do with dieting or choice.

Sensory sensitivities can affect taste, smell, texture, temperature and even the sound food makes when it's eaten.

Executive functioning differences may make meal planning, shopping and cooking more challenging.

For some people, hyperfocus means forgetting to eat altogether.

For others, dopamine-seeking behaviours influence food choices.

ARFID adds another layer entirely.

These experiences deserve understanding rather than judgement.

Food isn't simply fuel.

For many neurodivergent people, it's a sensory experience, an emotional experience and sometimes a significant daily challenge.

What Current Research Tells Us

Research consistently shows that our health is influenced by many interacting factors.

Diet is one of them.

So are sleep, stress, movement, genetics, social connection, mental wellbeing and our environment.

Current evidence also suggests that the gut and brain communicate continuously through complex pathways involving nerves, hormones and the immune system.

This doesn't mean every mental health difficulty begins in the gut.

Nor does it mean changing your diet will solve every health problem.

What it does tell us is that our physical and emotional health are deeply connected, and understanding both gives us the best opportunity to support our wellbeing.

Key Takeaways

Digestion is a complex process involving many organs and systems.

Everyone responds to food differently.

Genetics, hormones, stress, sleep, medication and the gut microbiome all influence digestion.

Neurodivergence can significantly shape a person's relationship with food.

There is no single diet that works for everyone.

Good nutrition is one important part of overall health, but it is rarely the only factor.

Before You Go...

If there's one thing I'd like you to remember after reading this article, it's this:

Please don't compare your body with someone else's.

Your friend may thrive on a particular way of eating while you feel unwell following exactly the same approach.

That doesn't mean either of you is wrong.

It simply reflects how wonderfully individual our bodies are.

The more we understand about digestion, nutrition and the many factors that influence health, the more compassionate we can become towards ourselves.

Health isn't about finding the perfect diet.

It's about finding the approach that supports your body, your lifestyle and your wellbeing.

For me, that understanding has been life-changing.

I hope this article helps you begin discovering what works best for you too.

Maggie Learoyd

Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Founder of Space to Breathe Therapy

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Testing should be considered alongside symptoms, clinical history and appropriate professional advice. A food allergy can be serious: suspected immediate allergy symptoms require medical assessment. IgG food-reactivity testing is different from diagnostic IgE allergy testing and remains debated, so results should not be used alone to diagnose illness or begin a highly restrictive diet.