

OPTIMAL DIGESTION

If you're reading this book, your digestion is probably not what you'd like it to be. Some people experience so many digestive problems that they forget what optimal digestion should feel like. The criteria used to define optimal digestion may vary slightly depending on whom you ask, but most gastrointestinal health experts would likely agree that optimal gut health involves most of the following criteria.

Table 7: Optimal Digestion

Aspects of Optimal Digestion	Specific Criteria
 <p>Effective Digestion and Absorption of Food</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Normal stomach acid levels, bile production, and digestive-enzyme secretion ▶ Absence of malnutrition, nutrient deficiencies, and dehydration ▶ Regular bowel movements (at least once per day) ▶ Normal stool consistency (Type 3 or 4 on the poop chart) ▶ Normal transit time (12 to 24 hours)
 <p>Absence of Gastrointestinal Problems</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ No abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, constipation, acid reflux, nausea, or vomiting ▶ No carbohydrate intolerance (fructose, lactose, sugar, starch) ▶ Normal intestinal permeability (no leaky gut) ▶ Absence of gastrointestinal disorders (Celiac disease, Crohn's disease, and other inflammatory bowel disorders) or good management of the condition(s) ▶ Absence of inflammation
 <p>Healthy Gut Flora</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ No bacterial or yeast overgrowth ▶ No infections from parasites, fungi, viruses, or pathogenic bacteria ▶ Normal composition and diversity of gut flora
 <p>Strong Immune Status</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Intact intestinal barrier (no leaky gut) ▶ Normal levels of antibodies ▶ Normal activity of the immune system ▶ Normal food tolerance (absence of abnormal food sensitivities) ▶ Absence of autoimmune conditions or good management of the condition(s)
 <p>Well-Being</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Good quality of life ▶ Absence of depression or other mood disorders ▶ Absence of food fears, disordered eating, and eating disorders.

*Adapted from Bischoff SC. 'Gut health': a new objective in medicine? BMC Med. 2011;9:24.

Even if your digestive health is far from optimal at the moment, nothing is set in stone. The food you eat or don't eat can have a huge impact on the factors in the table above. After learning about different digestive disorders in the next section, chapters 3, 4, and 5 will tell you all about the foods to seek out and the ones to avoid, while elucidating an approach for figuring out what your body wants and needs. Not everyone may be able to reach perfect digestive health, but a diet based on *real* food is one step closer to that ideal.