

Gut health: the lymphatic connection

Yvette Jordan explains the connection between a well-functioning lymphatic system and good gut health...

The lymphatic system is a *one-way* waste system. It starts with a broom handled shaped capillary laying directly underneath the skin and next to all our tiny blood capillaries all over the body. These lymphatic capillaries act like a sink plug hole, collecting waste, toxins, fats, protein and extra fluid to keep our blood clean and us healthy inside.

Our standalone, yet totally integrated, lymphatic system is stimulated open by a pressure change which occurs at the very end of every tiny blood vessel just as it is on its way back to the heart. This allows waste to be collected and relies on the movement of our muscles to create continuous movement throughout the system. The more the lymphatic system can clean us, the healthier inside our body becomes!

Principally, the lymphatic system is our immune system. It helps to protect us from everything from mild infections and insect bites to autoimmune diseases and cancer. Collectively, its main functions are to keep our protein levels regulated to help maintain correct blood pressure; transportation of fat from the digestive system and removal of unwanted waste and chemical toxins. It is a unique disposal and immune system and utilises key organs of the intestines, lungs, kidneys, spleen and liver to do this.

Compared with other systems of the body, the lymphatic system is relatively unexplored.

How is the lymphatic system connected to gut health?

Up to 60% of the lymphatic system lies inside the tummy and waist area. Poor digestion and sluggish movement of the lymphatic system within this area can cause dead or decaying cells to stagnate for years. This is our waste, and it needs to be moved along and out. Left to fester, it may cause the lymphatic system to become sluggish and blocked as it tries to clean the waste and fight disease and infection or a tiny blockage. Think of it as a waste system needing to be continually flushed just like your toilet.

The lacteals of the lymphatic system lie within your intestines, absorbing dietary fats, proteins, waste and any larger molecules the blood does not want to travel around the body. They collect and merge to form larger lymphatic vessels that transport the waste via lymph nodes around the tummy moving it up to the largest and main lymphatic vessel, the thoracic duct. This duct lays parallel to and travels up inside the spine, where clean fluid is put back into the blood stream via the veins in the neck and into the heart. The first discovery of this action was by physician Gaspard Asselli (1581-1626) of the lymphatic system in 1622 and were referred to as milky veins.

What impact does poor gut health have on the lymph system and vice versa?

If you imagine a busy motorway and an accident happens, none of the traffic can pass through as it is now stuck in a jam. This is the same effect on our lymphatic system if we don't move or we have a blockage. The more sedentary we are, the more waste and toxins we keep in our body and as the tummy is relevant to most of our waste disposal system it is vital that we keep this flowing. The system needs to move from the front first, just like cars at traffic lights.

An underperforming lymphatic system has a major effect on our waistlines! We don't think about it; we just think of it as being fat and not fluid. The larger you are, the less you will experience a bloated

abdomen or swollen breasts. It becomes the norm; we buy clothes that are looser and more elasticated. If the lymphatic system is not functional, then your immune system is also operating slowly. An enlarged tummy that overhangs the top of the thigh creates a blocking effect of the lymph fluid trying to flow up from the ankles. This causes ankles to swell, and this is seen as a sign of poor lymphatic health. If you suffer from a bloated swollen tummy after eating, this can be a sign the lymphatic system is working hard to remove extra unwanted fluid.

What are the signs that the lymph system is not performing as it should?

Enlarged lumps, swelling or an area that swells and does not go down naturally means there could be a blockage further up the system. Eczema can be a sign that the lymphatic system is excreting unwanted waste through the skin. Allergens and food irritants can show on the skin such as the inner crease of the elbow, or behind the knees. Coughing can be a reaction to an irritant in the lungs or food sensitivity because the body is fighting infection. It may also mean extra fluid is in the system and coughing is our way of contracting the diaphragm to move clean lymph up the system as it travels up towards the heart.

How can we support and improve our lymphatic system?

If your work is sedentary, try deep abdominal breathing and getting out of breath during regular exercise. Throughout the day regularly support the abdomen; sit upright with good posture; try not to slouch, keep the tummy firm and pulled in as often as you can as this helps to move fluid upwards away from the hips, legs and ankles. Regulate your intake of processed foods. Too much dairy is not a friend of the lymphatic system and can aggravate a sluggish system nor are hydrolyzed fats, sugar, wheat and gluten.

Digestion causes a natural inflammatory response and an enemy of the lymphatic system is extra fluid it cannot remove which may cause fluid retention, if not kept moving. If you already suffer with water retention, skin brushing is great to help the system, always start at the neck and with the brush use a pulling up movement and work towards the feet. Drink water regularly but make sure you are going to the toilet and not retaining the water.

Studies show stress can reduce the lymphatic system by up to fifty percent, so the best way is to relax and de-stress and the most natural way to improve lymphatic system for health is to have regular lymphatic drainage massage, particularly on the tummy. A 48-hour water fast can be helpful to flush the immune system and give it a boost, but please check with your GP first.

There are therapists who specialize in Manual Lymphatic Drainage, helping to get the lymph system moving. Searching online for MLD, LIM, LPP, or LPT therapists near you. More downloadable information is available on the UKLC website www.theuklc.com in the education section.

Yvette Jordan teaches LIM, LPT and LPPM. She hopes to awaken a new interest and awareness for all therapists, patients and clients as she continually strives to help improve health and well-being through education and awareness of the lymphatic system. Find out more at www.uklymphologyclinics.com