



Shake the handshake habit

The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* has called for the eventual phasing out of the universal handshake in health-care facilities. Citing the possibilities of transmitting everything from the common cold to *C. difficile*, it recommends alternative, noncontact greetings such as a wave, a hand over the heart or – if contact is really necessary – perhaps a fist bump.



Careful with pooch's smooches

We've heard it a million times, and some of us may even believe it: "Dogs' mouths are actually cleaner than humans'."

Julie Torruellas-Garcia, a microbiologist at Nova Southeastern University, says that's just not true.

In a recent report from CBS' Miami affiliate, lab-tested saliva samples from dogs proved to be anything but clean. One culture dish "had so many bacteria mixed together that it was difficult to test," Torruellas-Garcia says. The cultures revealed evidence of *Neisseria*, a bacteria linked to STDs, pneumonia and plaque.

Really, it should be common sense, she adds: "Think about where a dog tends to lick."

Living Well is designed to provide general information. It is not intended to be, nor is it, medical advice. Readers should consult their physicians when they have health problems.



WHEN FOOD IS THE ENEMY

BY MICHELLE GIBEALT TRAUB

Millions of Americans suffer, often in silence, from digestive distress. Bloating, gas, heartburn, constipation and diarrhea are common complaints, causing many to resign themselves to a life of discomfort. But that doesn't have to be the case. There are simple solutions to digestive woes that can begin as soon as your next meal.

Slow down. Many of us eat on the go, which is cause for trouble. Digestion is an intricate process. The digestive tract is approximately 30 feet long, and it can take food more than two days to make that journey. When the body is rushed or under stress, the nervous system diverts blood flow from the digestive tract, making it harder for digestion to occur. An easy remedy is to simply slow down and take a few deep breaths before a meal. Deep breathing helps the body relax while enabling the brain to register the aromas of the food. Those aromas alert the stomach to produce digestive juices. Making mealtime special – say, with candles and soft music – can encourage the relaxed state that is best for digestion.

Chew thoroughly. The stomach and intestines often get the spotlight when discussing digestion. But we forget that the mouth does much of the hard work. Our teeth grind each bite of food into small pieces, mixing them with enzymes to kick-start nutrient breakdown. Rushing the process can lead to bloating and gas, as air is more likely to be introduced. A small study determined that when people doubled the number of chews they made, they ate 15 percent less food.

Know thine enemy. Since we tend to be in such a hurry when eating, we may not even realize that certain foods are the cause of our pain and discomfort. Some of the usual suspects include carbonated beverages, coffee, alcohol, fatty or fried foods, onions, and spicy or acidic foods such as chili peppers, chocolate or citrus fruits. Artificial sweeteners (sugar alcohols) can also cause gas and bloating when consumed in excess. Watch for these in sugar-free candies and gums; they have names ending in "ol" (i.e., sorbitol, xylitol). In addition, many people have intolerances or sensitivities to common ingredients such as gluten (wheat), dairy, corn, sugar and soy. The best way to know for sure how a food or ingredient is affecting you is to keep a daily diary of what you eat and how it makes you feel.

Stay hydrated. Slowing down and avoiding foods that are difficult to digest are great ways to prevent problems. Staying

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hydrated every day by drinking four to eight cups of water – or enough fluids to keep your urine pale – and consuming ample fiber (20 to 30 grams) from whole grains, fruits and vegetables are additional ways to ensure that food moves smoothly through the digestive tract. Encouraging the growth of healthy bacteria can also assist your body in attaining the maximum nutrients from foods. Good bacteria can be consumed through probiotics in supplement form, or found naturally in yogurt and fermented foods such as sauerkraut, kombucha and kimchi.

Consider seeing a specialist. “Decreased stomach acid production, or a deficit of digestive enzymes, can also adversely affect digestion and lead to symptoms of gas or bloating,” registered dietitian Sonya Angelone says. “Finding the root cause of the discomfort is important to correct the problem instead of just managing the symptoms.” Consulting with a dietitian, naturopath or gastroenterologist may be necessary. Such experts can assess your individual situation and help you rediscover the joy in eating.

Michelle Gibeault Traub is a registered dietitian and health writer.

Online resources

The American Gastroenterological Association’s Patient Center

www.gastro.org/patient-center

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC)

digestive.niddk.nih.gov

VA curbs MRSA infections in hospitals, long-term care facilities

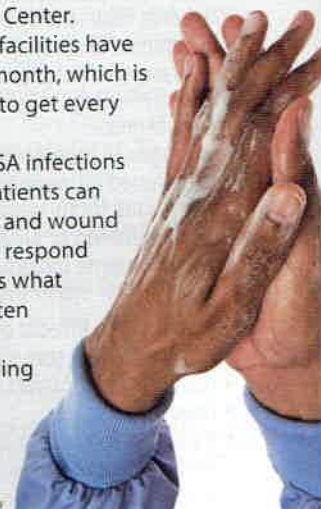
In early 2007, VA began an infection-control program throughout its 153 hospitals to reduce the number of patients contracting MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) infections, a matter of growing public concern. In January 2009, the program was expanded to the 133 VA long-term care facilities nationwide.

In 2011, VA reported that the program had resulted in a 62 percent drop in the rate of infections caused by MRSA in intensive care units, and a 45 percent drop in MRSA prevalence in other hospital areas, including surgical and rehabilitation units. A recent study in the *American Journal of Infection Control* shows that over 42 months, there was a 36 percent decline in MRSA infections in long-term care facilities as well.

“Our rates are very low,” says Dr. Martin E. Evans, director of the MRSA program at Lexington (Ky.) VA Medical Center. “Around 70 percent of our facilities have no MRSA infections each month, which is quite striking.” The goal is to get every site to zero, he adds.

In medical facilities, MRSA infections can lead to pneumonia. Patients can also develop bloodstream and wound infections. MRSA does not respond well to antibiotics, which is what makes it so serious and often life-threatening.

Evans says VA is expanding its program to other superbugs and bad bacteria.



Quality questions for quality care

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) reminds us that good health often depends on good communication. “Asking questions and providing information to your doctor and other care providers can improve your care,” it explains. “Talking with your doctor builds trust and leads to better results, quality, safety and satisfaction.”

Communication can also help us feel at ease when choosing a course of care. “One of the best ways to communicate with your doctor and health-care team is by asking questions,” according to AHRQ. So go to your physician armed with questions that will help him or her design care that works for you. Here are a few good ones:

- What is the test for?
- How many times have you performed this procedure?
- When will I get the results?
- Why do I need this treatment?
- Are there any alternatives?
- What are the possible complications?
- Which hospital is best for my needs?
- How do you spell the name of that drug?
- Are there any side effects?
- Will this medicine interact with ones I’m taking?

www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/index.html



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