

DO DIGESTIVE ENZYMES HELP OR HURT?

How to customize enzymes to what your body needs

Guest Blog by Jack Tips, Ph.D., C.C.N.

A Lesson From Goldilocks

Not too much, not too little, but just right!

Not too long, not too short, but just right!

Betaine Hydrochloride and various digestive enzymes, like many other therapeutic nutrients, are natural health and clinical nutrition tools that have amazing benefits when used with “prudence and judgment.” This refers to doing things correctly for each individual and never doing any harm. Here’s an overview of considerations about if enzyme supplementation is right for you and how to use them.

Who Does NOT Need Digestive Enzymes?

Healthy people and people with strong digestive systems would probably never think to augment their diets with betaine hydrochloride (hydrochloric acid—HCl) and/or supplemental enzymes for food digestion. After all, their digestive systems are working just fine. We’ve all heard of such people, rare as they are. They’ll brag that they have ‘cast iron stomachs’ and can ‘eat the south end out of a dead rhinoceros.’ Further, if prone to the “TMI disease” (too much info), they’ll tell you that they have perfectly formed stools with clockwork motions. Take supplemental enzymes? Why bother? Digestion is great. Such people fall under the colloquial rule, “It if ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” [Either such people are health aficionados, or check back in a year or so?]

Who DOES Need Digestive Enzymes?

Should a person have weak stomach digestive cells [exhausted parietal cells (the cells which produce HCl and intrinsic factor), exhausted chief cells (pepsinogen and chymosin enzymes); weak pancreatic output of enzymes; poorly formed stools; irregular bowel motions (constipation, diarrhea); heartburn; gas; bloating; and various gastrointestinal complaints; then it makes good sense to bolster the digestive system by taking supplemental enzymes – with prudence and judgment.

Actually, everyone at some time or other, can benefit from enzymes and improved digestion whether it’s gluten and casein digestants to lend a hand for a difficult job, hydrolytic to reduce pathogenic biofilms, proteolytic enzymes to reduce certain kinds of inflammation, HCl/pepsin to rest the parietal cells a spell, or general digestive enzymes to help a meal’s lack of raw foods.

7 Reasons That Favor Digestive Enzyme Supplementation

1. Digests food better to prepare for proper assimilation.
2. Increases nutrient uptake into the body.
3. Prepares food for better utilization by the gut microbiota, which in turn support assimilation and production of nascent vitamins.
4. Provides overworked, weary digestive processes a vacation so that digestive cells such as the stomach’s parietal cells and the pancreas’ exocrine cells (acinar, ductile) can rest and rebuild their integrity. Fasting (abstaining from eating) has a historic precedent for this good reason, and so a time of rest via enzymes is a new method in that theme.
5. Helps mimic adequate gastric enzyme output that triggers the digestive cascade and elicits pancreatic completion of digestion via pancreatic enzymes.
6. Bolsters weakened digestion to counter the modern lifestyle of grazing and snacking. Nibbling puts a constant demand on digestive enzyme production and creates weary enzyme-producing cells. “Enzyme decline” is occurring earlier than it used to. Thirty years ago, health science researchers said that digestive strength drops to 50% by age 50. Now they are saying that it’s happening by age 30.
7. Helps the immune system control pathogens and parasites.

2 Cautions Regarding Digestive Enzyme Supplementation

Here’s where prudence and judgment factors into the enzyme supplementation equation.

“If you don’t use it, you lose it.” This aphorism applies to betaine hydrochloride and digestive enzymes as well as any other “crutch” supplements where the supplement does for the body what the body is supposed to do for itself. The concern here is that overuse of enzymes can cause the enzyme producing cells to stop producing because the body’s regulatory feedback loops register that there’s plenty of enzymes available.

Note: There are two reasons to take supplements:

- 1) To provide the body with nutrients in short supply to maintain optimal levels
- 2) To augment the body’s natural production so the body gets a rest and an opportunity to effect repair of its innate systems.

We Must Correct the Cause

The highest calling of healing is to help correct the cause so the body can heal itself. Taking digestive enzymes does not specifically correct the cause, but they can contribute to correcting the cause when employed in conjunction with other cause-corrective measures. Unless the cause is corrected, taking enzymes is only a ‘make-do’ activity.

Seemingly counter to those two points would be if a person does not eat enough raw foods, then supplemental enzymes would make up for the missing enzymes that are innate in raw food, but are ruined by the cooking process.

So, we could well have a case that IF a diet is not some 66-75% raw foods, THEN supplemental enzymes would make up for the deficit and help the body with its increased enzyme workload.

A reasonable thought, but it doesn’t really pan out. The enzymes in a food are “food specific” meaning that they help digest that particular food according to Nature’s plan, whereas supplemental digestive enzymes are “general” and not food specific. For example, broccoli has broccoli-specific enzymes, rutabaga has rutabaga-specific enzymes, and kohlrabi has kohlrabi-specific enzymes that help break down the specific cell components (cellulose, membranes) and molecular bonds when the raw food is eaten. So it’s not quite apples-to-apples to think that a supplement will completely accommodate a dietary dearth of raw foods, but it makes sense that they would help mitigate the workload, improve digestion, and conserve innate enzymes, so not such a bad idea. Just no substitute for Nature’s immutable laws.

From that perspective, we can understand the natural health practice of taking a broad-spectrum digestive enzyme when a meal is mostly cooked foods, e.g. a bowl of rice with steamed vegetables, meat with cooked side dishes, or soup, etc.

Case in Point for “Correct the Cause”

Mary Freeman snacked on peanuts all day long and developed digestive symptoms: indigestion, collywobbles, heartburn, foul gas, and constipation. Her stool often had undigested foods in it. She wondered, “How did this happen?” The issue is that the snacking on complex peanut proteins depleted her HCl production processes and exhausted her pancreas’ protease enzyme production. This caused putrefaction in the lower bowel as protein foods were no longer properly digested.

Being natural health savvy, Mary stated that she didn’t want to address the heartburn by suppressing HCl with proton pump inhibition. She knew that 90% of all heartburn stems from LOW stomach acid not facilitating the stomach valve to close thus allowing the even low acid output to burn the esophagus, not excess stomach acid! She did not want a dangerous, anxiety-suppressive drug used for queasiness. She knew the dangers and side effects. And she didn’t want a laxative to override the constipation and cause dependency. She wanted to find the cause, correct it, and regain her health freedom.

In Mary’s case, the cause was marital stress. She felt unappreciated, so she ate peanuts as a proxy for appreciation, e.g. eating alleviates stress and is nurturing. The perpetual snacking caused both HCl and digestive enzyme depletion. Thus, digestive symptoms began ruling her life.

Her remedial activities included:

- 1) Marital counseling to help solve the marital issues (which were quickly resolved)
- 2) She stopped eating the peanuts all the time—oral gratification was a poor substitute and peanuts were easily abandoned to the benefit of her waistline
- 3) She used a broad spectrum enzyme supplement (HCL, enzymes, in an herbal base) with each meal for 75 days after which she discontinued. Of course, the results were life-changing.

How Long is too Long?

It varies from person to person, but generally, it takes several months of consistent use. And yes, stopping the supplements can allow the body to come back from vacation, rested and refreshed to restart their normal function.

What is too High a Dose?

That would be way, way beyond the label recommendations. But I have seen it done where proteolytic enzymes were used to lower inflammation, but the person used so much that she disturbed the gut microbiota's beneficial biofilms. The person took horrendously high doses (five times the label recommendation three times a day for three months before realizing she needed to stop. It took 60 days of remedial effort to resolve.

So our prudence and judgment criteria recognize that there is an upper limit to both amount and time for supplementation. But generally, a person would have to work really hard and incur some significant expense to push those limits. Judicious use of enzymes is a terrific therapy.

So let's apply this discussion to the popular practices: HCl Challenge and Digestive Enzyme supplementation. The HCl/Pepsin Challenge employed in Christa Orecchio's Gut Thrive In 5™ program is a terrific way to give the parietal cells a rest and some time to rejuvenate themselves while reestablishing connections with the pancreatic processes via pepsin. Because it is a system of listening to the body for the maximum effective dosage, and it soon returns the digestion to an 'improved normal' where taking HCl/pepsin ceases, it meets the criteria of safe, effective, do no harm, and it supports a facet of "correct the cause."

How to Know when Enough is Enough?

Simple enough. Digestive symptoms abate and remain gone after supplementation stops.

What's the Bottom Line?

Digestive enzymes are wonderful supplements. Periodic programs are very beneficial. Everyone should have some around for times of need. Prudence and judgment means to use enzymes as means to beneficial ends, but always endeavor to correct the cause and support your body to function well on its own.