

Digestion &c.

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Every man, whether physician or patient, is interested in the subject of Digestion; for on the condition of the stomach, & facility of digestion depends, in a great measure the comfortable feelings of the whole man, corporal, and corporeal, that is to say the body merely, and the body & mind conjointly. If Digestion be well performed, the chyle is proper, be the food ever so various; the blood made from this chyle will be natural, the secretions & excretions regular; health, strength & activity will ensue, & disease vanish: But if digestion languish, the contrary happens be the food whatever it may unless the injured faculties be restored to their natural state and vigor.

This wonderful organ has a remarkable contractility, by which it applies its inner surface closely to the ingesta, or materials it incloses; but ^{the} healthy contractility of this prime organ of Digestion is not owing merely to the force of its own fibres; but depends on the joint energy of the whole system; for it is an undoubted fact, that the more vigorously the stomach applies itself to its contents, the more speedily is digestion performed, and the braver does a man feel, the better does he walk, labor, think & write. Besides, a regular supply of milky fluid is necessary to recruit & repair those parts of the animal machine, that are incessantly wearing down, & passing off, by the very actions requisite to life. For want of this supply the sufferer pines away for want of a nourishing supply; an universal bad habit of body ensues; a complication of disorders succeed each other from bad to worse, the patient becomes emaciated and at length dies.

We have said, that we are all interested in this subject of Digestion. Are we not all interested in this question? "that seeing all animals, ourselves excepted, enjoy every pleasure, their natures are capable of, strangers to pain & sickness, and (abstracted from external accidents) arrive at the natural period of their being - Is it not of importance to enquire, whether it be a necessary consequence of our superior faculties, that not one in 10,000 of our species dies a natural death; but struggle on "through a frail & feeble being," in continual danger of sickness, pain & dotage, & the thousand nameless ills that flesh is heir to." Are these evils adventitious & unnatural to our constitution is a question of the first importance to every reflecting man. Is it not worth every man's while to enquire whence these things arise, and how they may be remedied? My serious opinion is, that these adventitious evils affect us through the stomach. They arise from not following the simplicity of nature in our meats & drinks. While other animals feed on grass & water we live on almost every article, diversified by the art of cookery.

That the stomach is the common centre of all our feelings & energies will appear from the following instance. A man in the best health, in perfect good humor & the highest spirits, and feeling, at the same time a keen appetite, sitting down to dinner with his friends, receives suddenly some very afflicting news. Instantly his appetite is gone, and he cannot swallow a morsel. Let the same thing happen after he has made a hearty, cheerful meal, at once ~~the action~~ the action of his stomach ceases; the whole power of digestion is cut off, as if his stomach were become paralytic; & what he has eaten lies a most oppressive load.

You may ask, what connexion can there possibly be between a piece of bad news and a man's stomach? We answer that the animal spirits, or nervous energy is called off to support the tumultuous agitation of the brain, and the stomach with all its appendages and secretions is left powerless & paralytic.

It is clearly proved that the ^{principal agent in the} process of digestion is a peculiar fluid, secreted in the stomach, called the gastric juice. Not only the quantity but the quality of this singular liquor depends on the contractile power of the stomach, as a proximate cause; and on the energy of the whole system, as a remote one. This is the case on a sudden stroke of affliction. In like manner, in silent, and long continued grief this fluid is deficient in quantity & depraved in quality. The chyle is of course vitiated and all the functions of the stomach perverted. Its contents become not only sour, but ~~rancid~~ rancid & bitter. The patient pines away for want of a nourishing supply, & an universal bad habit of body ensues; a complication of disorders succeed, from bad to worse; and if the miserable sufferer cannot subdue anxiety, he sinks under his distress & dies.

You will perceive ~~that~~ in this sorrowful picture, that the stomach suffers first; for whatever sinks the spirits injures that organ; and whatever injures the stomach damps the spirits

Many errors have been propagated & rivitted by the application of the laws of mechanics, & mathematical calculations. To estimate the digestive powers of the stomach, by the size & number of its fibres and muscles is a misapplication of an useful branch of learning. A great deal more than the size of the muscles goes to constitute activity or force. It is not he who has the biggest legs, says Goldsmith that can make the best use of them. Those therefore who have written elaborate treatises on muscular force & have estimated the strength of animals, & of their particular organs by the thickness of their muscles, have been employed, as mathematicians sometimes are, to very little purpose. It is constantly observed that thin, raw boned men are always stronger & more powerful than such as are seemingly more muscular. And these thin men are found to be men of the keenest appetite, that is they digest the quickest & of course eat the most. There is no quadruped of the size of man that is nearly so strong, not even the lion. There is therefore an energy, beyond the mere mechanical force of fibres tendons, & their combinations into muscles, & membranes. All these things should be taken into consideration, when we would examine the theories of the mathematical physicians, particularly as it regards the force & powers of the digestive organs. —

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