

Digestive Bitters

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Why is it that everywhere we turn we see something about bitters? What are bitters and what are they for?

Well bitters are herbs and foods that have a predominantly bitter taste. They range from mild to strong. They are recognized as playing a major role in holistic health due to their wide range of effects on the body's physiology.

When we eat something bitter a response is sent to the brain suggesting that food is on the way. One **MUST** taste the bitterness and therefore it is not effective to take such remedies via a capsule or pill. When the cell membranes of the bitter taste receptors are affected, a signal is sent to the gustatory nerve which then sets off a whole chain reaction of events.

A few of these reactions are:

- an increase in gastrin secretion in the stomach; this response prepares the stomach for food and increases the appetite: this is beneficial for conditions such as anorexia, digestive disorders in the elderly and for convalescence;
- to protect the gastrointestinal mucosa by increasing tone of the gastro-esophageal sphincter, by improving pancreatic matrix regeneration and by increasing the gastric mucosal lining regeneration; this response is beneficial for conditions such as heartburn, gastric irritation, infection and ulceration, gastric reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, Diabetes mellitus II, blood sugar regulation and hiatal hernia;
- an increase in the bile stimulation which increases the detoxification of the liver, decreases the accumulation of bile in the liver, and dilutes the bile; this response is beneficial for conditions such as congestive liver, gallbladder complaints including gallstones and high concentration of bile, allergies and any metabolic or immunological conditions with the gastrointestinal system; bile is also a natural laxative and is therefore beneficial for constipation;
- as a regulatory effect on the pancreas; this is beneficial for conditions such as Diabetes mellitus II and blood sugar control;
- an increase in digestive secretions including those from the liver, stomach, salivary glands, pancreas and duodenum; this response helps with the optimum breakdown of foods which decreases the risk of a leaky gut syndrome; this response also stimulates the release of the protective secretions as well; this response is beneficial for conditions such as food sensitivities, allergies, inflamed gastrointestinal tract, malabsorption problems, and autoimmune conditions;
- as an endocrine stimulant and tonic since toning one area helps to tone another area due to the interconnectedness of the entire body; this response is beneficial for hormonal imbalances and fever management;
- as a general tonic to the whole system due to all the points mentioned above; this is beneficial for the health and maintenance of the whole digestive system;

Since the whole response from bitters is a reflex action, bitters need be only given in small doses. By just having a strong bitter sensation in the mouth is enough. Sometimes just a few drops of a bitter tincture on the tongue is enough.

In North America we are a very sweet and salty society. We have very little sour and bitter foods. Bitters help to prime the digestive system preparing it for food and therefore relieving the system of the shock and stress imposed on it. When we shovel in the food our digestive system is not ready for it. There is little wonder why digestive system problems and complaints are high in North America.

Examples of bitter and sour foods:

dandelion greens
endive
cauliflower
beet greens
grapefruits
lemons
lemon water

apple cider vinegar
herbal coffee substitutes
Chartreuse (a herbal liqueur)

Examples of mildly bitter herbs:

artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*)
blessed thistle (*Cnicus benedictus*)
burdock (*Arctium lappa*)
dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*)
catnip (*Nepeta cataria*)

Examples of strongly bitter herbs:

Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)
gentian (*Gentiana* spp.)
goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*)
hops (*Humulus lupulus*)
horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*)
motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*)
rue (*Ruta graveolens*)
skullcap (*Scutellaria laterifolia*)
wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*)
yarrow (*Achillea millifolium*)
yellowdock (*Rumex crispus*)

The active constituents that are mainly responsible for the bitterness in plants are glycosides, resins, volatile oils, alkaloids and tannins.

The best way to take bitters is 10 to 30 minutes before each meal or heavy snack.