Is leaky gut the cause of your illness? Autoimmune disease? Inflammation?

This column is going to address an issue that I see regularly with patients, yet is one about which they are usually unfamiliar.

Leaky gut is also known as “increased intestinal permeability”. It occurs when your intestinal lining has been damaged and the tight junctions in the gut that control absorption of nutrients do not work properly.  Substances like bacteria, toxins and incompletely digested proteins that should not normally be absorbed by your intestine then leak into the bloodstream. Recent studies of the human microbiome (the microbe population that enables your digestive system to function) and findings of the Human Genome Project are beginning to give us a better understanding of the organisms in our digestive tract and our body's many reactions to them. In the past few years there have been studies linking multiple sclerosis, celiac disease, autoimmune hepatitis, autism, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, eczema and other autoimmune disease to intestinal permeability.

It can take a long time to develop an autoimmune disease or it can feel like it happened overnight. You may already have a diagnosis or you may feel signs of excessive inflammation. If you are taking ibuprofen every day, you are inflamed.

The cause of leaky gut is a poor diet, often in combination with food sensitivities, chronic stress, excessive alcohol, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSIADS), or an overload of toxins and bacteria imbalances.

The mainstream medical profession only recently recognized this condition because of a prior lack of scientific evidence, while Naturopathic physicians have been working with patients on the permeability issue for years. It is at the essence of our philosophy as Naturopaths, which is **restore normal function**. Researcher Dr. Alessio Fasano, of the University of Maryland, published in a 2009 edition of the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* an article *Tight Junctions, Intestinal Permeability and Autoimmunity* in which he postulates "besides genetic and environmental factors, loss of intestinal barrier function is necessary to develop autoimmunity." The intestinal barrier is the easiest to control and restore.

He also published in a *Scientific American* "the effects of gluten on zonulin, which controls the tight junctions leading to the increased permeability." This is probably the documented reason people with Hashimoto's thyroid disease should avoid gluten. Although this should also tell us that all individuals with autoimmune disease should avoid gluten, as it increases permeability.

In a healthy digestive tract, these tight junctions open and close quickly and the immune system reacts cleaning up the mess, just as it should. During an unhealthy response, these substances leak into your bloodstream, overburdening your immune system and causing inflammation. Not only is your digestive tract affected, but these substances get into your tissues resulting in whole body inflammation.

Healing your intestines is essential to health. So what should you do?

1) Eliminate junk food

2) Test for and eliminate food sensitivities

3) Reduce stress

4) Control inflammation with substances other than NSAIDS

5) Test for abnormal bacteria in your digestive tract, then decrease your toxic load

6) Give your Gi Tract the necessary nutrients to heal.

This is all part of treating your symptoms in a holistic manner.

As Hippocrates said “all disease begins in the gut”

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