

Mechanical Digestion: Mastication

the importance of chewing food properly to facilitate good digestion



What is mastication?

Mastication is the art of chewing food and the process by which we break-down food into smaller particles in readiness for swallowing, and to start the process of digestion. It is typically an instinctive and rhythmical automatic movement similar to breathing or walking however, when we become mindful of chewing we can intentionally slow down, speed up, or stop. This may be helpful when seeking to optimise digestive processes, beginning with the mechanical processes that occur in the mouth. The combined mechanics of the jaw opening and shutting (bite force), the teeth chewing and grinding food and the tongue manipulating the food as it moves around your mouth all begin the process of digestion. Saliva is secreted and mixed with the food to provide moisture which makes it easier to swallow. Saliva also introduces the first of many digestive enzymes which start breaking down carbohydrate ingredients (sugars and starches).

Why is mastication important for digestion?

The more food is chewed and broken-down before swallowing the easier it is for each subsequent stage of digestion. When food is bolted and swallowed in large mouthfuls it presents a bigger challenge for the stomach. The gastric acid contained in the stomach is highly acidic to help break-down food for easier digestion but imagine the difference when this acid has to break down a large food particle versus a smaller, well-chewed particle. Chewing food properly is therefore an easy way to assist your stomach. This is especially helpful in individuals where stomach acid levels may not be optimal and they experience symptoms of acidity, reflux, indigestion located in the upper stomach region and/or general discomfort digesting.

How to optimise digestion by chewing?

There are multiple ways to support digestion by better chewing:

- Engaging the senses and mindful mastication can be helpful for preparing your body for eating. Taking time to prepare food, and sensory interaction with ingredients (sight & smell) before eating can activate salivary enzymes long before the food even enters the mouth.
- Mindfully slowing down your chew action and aiming to masticate each mouthful for a minimum of 20-30 chews per mouthful (There is no set number and this may vary from softer to harder foods).
- Taking time between mouthfuls to allow a full swallow and arrival of each mouthful in the stomach. This helps the stomach prepare for the next phase of digestion, and also register when it is full.

