

# Every Body Needs Bitters

---

By: Eula Gonzales

Back in the day, like waaay back in the day, our ancestors used to forage the landscape seeking out the spring seasons early offerings of bitters. The newly sprung bitters, be it root, leaf or bark, offered the recently sedentary digestive system a wake up call. Bitters stimulate important digestive secretions, warm the inner organs, and supports overall digestion. They are traditionally used around the world, but these days they are most commonly used in Europe.

There are three categories of bitters. Bitter bitters, Carminative bitters and Heating bitters. Bitter bitter herbs are responsible for producing the digestive secretions of hydrochloric acid, gastrin and digestive enzymes. Each one of these secretions plays a part in breaking down food in the stomach, cleansing the digestive tract and stimulating digestion. Bitter bitters provide support to the liver and gallbladder, they also increase the production of bile which aids in the break down of fat. Dandelion and Yellow Dock Root are two examples of bitter bitters.



Carminative bitters offer general digestive support. They help to relieve gas and bloating, assimilate nutrients, and improve peristalsis, which is the sequence of muscle contractions responsible for propelling food through the digestive tract. Fennel seed, anise seed, peppermint and cardamom are some of the more common carminative bitters.

Heating bitters do just as they say, they warm the organs and digestive tract, as well as increase the vitality of digestive functions. With that being said, drinking fluids, especially cold fluids is not recommended prior to or during a meal. Doing so dilutes

essential enzymes in the saliva and cools the digestive tract, weakening its function. Ginger is both a carminative and heating bitter.

The digestive system is a well-synchronized process that relies on both physical and chemical reactions to aid in the proper assimilation of nutrients and elimination of waste. It is said to be the essence of good physical health. Rightly so, considering that our food nourishes our bodies. If our digestive system is not functioning properly, our bodies will fail to assimilate and absorb the food's nutrients, making every aspect of our body's complete functions suffer. Common signs of poor digestion include gas, indigestion and bloating. It can cause constipation, diarrhea and lower energy levels. Poor digestive function can even manifest itself as skin irritations such as acne, eczema and boils.

Consuming bitter roots and herbs on a daily basis can improve and stabilize the digestive system. Tasting the bitters, especially the bitter bitters, is important as they instigate the digestive secretions once they touch the larger taste buds at the back of the tongue. This creates a chain reaction starting in the salivary glands that increase production of enzyme-rich saliva, allowing for the break down of complex starches.

Next, the stomach releases the hormone gastrin which stimulates the hydrochloric acid that breaks down proteins, kills harmful microbes present in our food and improves mineral absorption. Pepsin, an enzyme that aids in the break down of large protein molecules is also triggered by gastrin.

Further into the small intestines, bitters prompt the liver to produce bile and the gallbladder to excrete it. Bile is essential in breaking down fats and absorbing fat-soluble nutrients. It also promotes the expulsion of waste from the liver while lubricating the intestines, making for the easy passage of stool. Bitters then elicit digestive enzymes from the pancreas, allowing for the complete break down of nutrients. While insulin and glucagon are produced to stabilize blood sugar levels.

As you can see, the digestive system is a complex machine that relies on bitters to instigate the necessary components for proper digestion. Returning to our ancestral eating habits aligns with our annual circadian rhythm, and re-sets the body system as a whole. You can consume leafy bitter or ingest them in a tincture, tea or cocktail form. Consider giving them a try. Your belly will thank you for it.



### References

1. Sheila Manzagol, Shinning Mountain Herbs
2. Emily Stock, Sundial Medicinals
3. Danielle Charles-Davies, Bitters: The Revival of a Forgotten Flavor

