



POSTURE, DIGESTION AND DINING ON THE FLOOR

By Megan Patiry | Articles

No, this isn't a new trend. Rather, it's one of the oldest known to man.

Eating on the floor, or more accurately, the ground, has been the practice of humans for far longer than our newfound custom of chair sitting. Our ancient ancestors lounged on the most rugged of recliners: logs, stumps and the occasional smooth rock. When these benches weren't readily available, they chose the most convenient, accessible option to rest and dine: the ground.

This practice has remained so ingrained that many cultures around the world, including the Japanese and Indian, still dine *à la floor*, with many claiming certain digestive benefits of doing so.

Now, we're all familiar with the dangers of sitting too much: increased mortality,¹ forward slouch² and spinal problems,² but what about the flip side? Are there truly any benefits to digestion when we physically eat like our ancestors?

We do know that the people of India still practice the ancient Ayurvedic and yogic tradition of eating on the floor in *sukhasana*, aka cross-legged, claiming that the pose sends a signal to the brain to prepare for digestion, and that the back-and-forth movement of bending forward to eat stimulates the digestive juices, aiding in improved digestion. It has also been claimed that the posture directs blood flow into the stomach when one sits on the floor, rather than the feet as when one sits in a chair, further enhancing digestive prowess.

In addition, the Japanese also dine on the floor in the formal position *seiza*, which involves sitting atop the shins and heels. It is said to encourage natural lumbar curve, reduce anxiety and, again, increase blood circulation throughout the digestive system.³

Both of these postures claim to also strengthen the muscles of the back and abdomen, as the body has to prop itself up rather than rely on a chair, and also has to acquire the strength and mobility to move from the floor to the ground and back up again.

While studies relating to these eating postures are lacking, research *has* shown that sitting in *sukhasana* while meditating significantly reduces stress parameters, and we know that stressed eating hinders digestion.⁴ We also know that sitting in a chair for too long pushes the disks of the spine together, reducing circulation and causing collagen to harden around ligaments and joints, giving credence to the claim that *sukhasana* and *seiza* promote circulation and lubrication.²

In the end, the same reason we eat food similar to what our ancestors ate can also apply to the physical way in which they ate it. As mentioned, chairs are a very recent invention, and studies looking at their effects on our systems suggest they place the body in an unnatural (and frankly, painful) position. Anything we can do to return to or mimic our natural state of sitting will be an important factor in improving digestion.

Postprandial Posture

Interestingly, it's not only the posture in which we enjoy our meals that's important, but also how we move after we've eaten—or, rather, how we refrain from moving. That's right. While conventional wisdom tells us to move a little or take a short walk following dinner, some studies suggest doing the opposite if you want to maximize digestion.

For instance, a study on postprandial posture (i.e., how you sit after eating) conducted by researchers in Japan involved having female patients either sit up or lie down for four hours following breakfast. Tests at the conclusion of the study revealed that transit time of the food was indeed slower for the patients who were lying down following their meal. Now, it may seem that this would result in some form of bloating or discomfort due to the longer digestion time; however, even though the transit time of the food was shorter in participants who sat up after eating, there was actually *more* fermentation and malabsorption of carbs than in the participants who laid down.⁵

These findings led the researchers to conclude that, at the very least, carbohydrates are absorbed more efficiently while lying down versus sitting up. It's one of those conclusions that doesn't seem to make sense at first glance, since we've long associated too many carbs plus being sedentary with fat storage and other negatives. However, the author makes an interesting point that brings the nervous system into play. By lying down following a meal, we help flip the evolutionary switch from the sympathetic nervous system, or fight-or-flight mode, to the parasympathetic nervous system, our "rest" mode.

In flipping this switch, we allow more blood to flow to our digestive system rather than our muscles, allowing the body to focus almost solely on digestion. Interestingly, this mimics the idea of eating in sukhasana to stimulate the flow of blood and digestive juices to the stomach.

The takeaway? If this study teaches us anything, it's that naps after eating are good, and should possibly be mandated in the name of health.

In an ideal world, perhaps. For those of us who are looking to improve digestion but are unable to siesta after meals, here are some tips to mimic the effect:

- **Try not to eat while stressed.** Our ancestors reserved fight-or-flight mode for hunting and sprinting to safety from larger predators. Nowadays, stress has the same effect on our bodies, whether the stress is mental or physical. By relaxing before eating, you prep your body to focus on sustenance and less on pumping out adrenaline and prepping you for a fight.
- **Try eating in a calm space.** Even if you are unable to sit on the floor and eat, try to find a space that relaxes you. Perhaps instead of eating lunch at your desk, you can step outside and find a nearby park bench or quiet room. For breakfast, instead of wolfing down your meal in record time, try lending a few minutes to sitting and

enjoying every tasty morsel while watching the sun rise (even if it's through the window!).

- **Allow a decent amount of time to pass following your meal before you work out.** I know it's impossible for most of us to lie down for four or more hours after eating and before hitting the gym, but even a couple hours of waiting might benefit digestion.
- **Start a yoga practice.** Specifically, start a yoga practice centered on postures that benefit digestion. These include twisting poses such as triangle, revolving triangle, downward dog, cat-cow and bridge.
- **Meditate.** Hailed as one of the most potent stress-relieving tools, and for good reason. Focus on deep breathing while relaxing and contracting the abdominal muscles fully. This will strengthen the abdominal wall while also training the diaphragm to relax and contract correctly, aiding in less gas and bloating.⁶

References

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That's very interesting Megan. I'm going to try it!