

How Poor Gut Health Fuels Inflammation and Fatigue

by John Pittman, MD

Recently I was speaking with a group of physicians at a meeting for the North Carolina Integrative Medicine Society. At one point, one of my colleagues listed the 25 most commonly reported problems that had been seen at the Carolina Center for Integrative Medicine over the past decade. Two conditions topping the list were fatigue and digestive problems such as diarrhea, malabsorption, and *leaky gut*—a condition whereby the intestinal tissues become damaged (often through a combination of poor diet and stress), allowing toxins to trickle into the bloodstream and compromise one's health.

It turns out that a leaky gut can be closely related to the top medical complaint of all time, fatigue. How these two are related, as explained in a report published in the 29 December 2008 issue of *Neuro Endocrinology Letters*, is that leaky gut sets the stage for whole-body inflammation and oxidative stress (an excess of toxic free radicals), and this in turn promotes fatigue. Chronic, low-level inflammation is also what underlies fibromyalgia and other medically unexplained conditions. It also plays a key role in the genesis of cancer, heart disease, and many other common disorders.

In this recent study—designed to confirm findings from a 2007 study of the same issue—Martine Maes and his colleagues at the Clinical Research Center for Mental Health in Belgium, measured blood levels of certain antibodies against LPS, a toxin linked with “bad bugs” or disease-causing microbes in the intestines. The researchers measured levels of LPS antibodies before and after receiving a combination of supplements that help control inflammation and oxidative stress—namely glutamine, N-acetyl cysteine and zinc—in conjunction with a “leaky gut diet” (gluten-free, dairy-free, and sugar-free) over the course of 10 to 14 months. The diet and supplement regimen resulted in a significant reduction in the LPS antibody levels, and this in turn was associated with a reduction in chronic fatigue.

The results support the view that leaky gut, along with the systemic inflammation it generates, may be key factors in the chronic fatigue syndrome. By patching up the leaky gut—something that can be accomplished with glutamine and other supplements—and reducing the oxidative and inflammatory stress, one can have a major impact on this condition.

Why is this such a significant study? Millions of Americans have an overgrowth of "bad bugs" in the gut, which in turn contributes to the leaky gut and low-level chronic inflammation described above. These types of problems have been a major focus of my medical practice since I opened the doors at the Carolina Center 15 years ago. Based on our records, we estimate that at least 75% of patients who come here are suffering from varying degrees of this problem—an imbalance in intestinal bacteria, which very often perpetuates leaky gut and fatigue.

A Success Story: Jenny Rawlings

I've just explained how, by adhering to a diet and supplement plan that helps heal the gut, you can often recover a high level of energy and vitality. Let me now share a story of one of my patients who was able to benefit from this approach.

Jenny Rawlings is a 45-year-old woman who first came to see me two years ago for chronic fatigue and an achy bodily condition known as fibromyalgia. Prior to her first visit at the Carolina Center, she had gone to numerous physicians for help. After two years of declining health, none of the eight specialists she had seen could tell her what was wrong with her. "I couldn't sleep, I was in constant pain, my limbs would go numb periodically," Jenny recalls. She was also suffering from stroke-like episodes. "When I couldn't say what was in my brain or the words would come out all jumbled. I knew I had Fibromyalgia, but I believed there was something else wrong as well."

I explained to Jenny that Fibromyalgia was a chronic, whole-body inflammatory condition that often coincided with gut-based problems such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and chronic intestinal infections. When I evaluated her at the Carolina Center, I found that she had an extremely severe yeast infection, leaky gut, low hormone levels (including thyroid hormone and progesterone), deficits in certain vitamins and minerals, and very high levels of heavy metals. All of those factors had combined to give Jenny a severely compromised immune system, making her vulnerable to a host of microbes.

“My body couldn't fight off anything,” Jenny says. “The testing that was performed by Dr. Pittman gave me a much clearer indication of what was wrong with me. Those tests, which were blood and urine tests, were very simple, and yet the problems they identified seemed profoundly important. It frustrated me no end that none of the eight doctors I'd seen previously asked for such a comprehensive panel.”

Jenny then received several courses of intravenous vitamins to quickly build up her nutritional reserves and help reboot her immune system. She also started a regimen of anti-fungal treatments, thyroid medication and progesterone, and she adjusted her pain and sleeping medications. The recommended supplements included probiotics, Krebs magnesium, and vitamins B, C, D, and E. I recommended that she try to follow a gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free diet to starve the yeast in her body. She also started a colon cleanse and began colon hydrotherapy, because her colon had become a source of tremendous toxicity. After her yeast infection was under control, she underwent chelation therapy to remove the heavy metals. Lastly, she worked with a personal trainer to build strength and help compensate for her Fibromyalgia.

Jenny says she started feeling better immediately after receiving the intravenous vitamins, and then noticed a huge shift in her energy and well-being within a month of starting treatment. Nevertheless, it wasn't all fun and game. The yeast die-off reaction from the anti-fungal medications was severe, causing her to feel disoriented for a short period of time. “Once that was behind me, and once I was completely on the special diet, I immediately began feeling much better,” she recalls. “My brain fog started to clear up

and some of my energy returned. I lost fifteen pounds that I had gained from adverse reactions to Lyrica. It was like I had entered into a totally new body, a new experience of life.”

Jenny improved steadily over the course of nine months. Today her fibromyalgia episodes are less frequent and much shorter in duration. The yeast infection is gone, and her immune system is greatly improved. This winter, everyone else in Jenny’s family has had severe colds and flus, and yet she never came down with a single ailment, even though she was taking care of her family members. “The old me would have been sick for months,” she says, smiling.

Jenny’s recovery was by no means a "quick fix”. It took a tremendous amount of commitment on her part, along with plenty of support from the Carolina Center’s dedicated staff. But she says all the work has paid off in many more ways than one, and she is deeply grateful for this new lease on life. “Last year, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to work again,” she says. “This year, I’m starting my own business. I’m not only better but much more educated about my health, my body, and what it takes to be healthy and strong in today’s world.”

* To meet with Dr. Pittman, or for more information about improving digestive health through the integrative approach, please contact the Carolina Center for Integrative Medicine at: 919-571-4391