

CHAPTER 24

The digestive system

24.1 Overview of the digestive system

Two groups of organs compose the digestive system:

the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and the accessory digestive organs.

gastrointestinal (GI) tract, or alimentary canal (alimentary = nourishment), is a continuous tube that extends from the mouth to the anus through the thoracic and abdominopelvic cavities.

The length of the GI tract is **about 5–7 metres (16.5–23 ft) in a living person** when the muscles along the wall of the GI tract organs are in a state of tonus.

It is **longer in a cadaver (about 7–9 metres or 23–29.5 ft)** because of the loss of muscle tone after death.

FUNCTIONS OF THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

1. Ingestion, taking food into the body.
2. Secretion, release of water, acid, buffers, and enzymes into lumen of GI tract.
3. Mixing, continuous stirring and movement of food through GI tract.
4. Digestion, mechanical and chemical breakdown of food.
5. Absorption, uptake of digested products from GI tract into blood and lymph.
6. Defecation, elimination of wastes from GI tract.

3. Mixing and propulsion. Alternating contractions and relaxations of smooth muscle in the walls of the GI tract mix food and secretions and move them towards the anus. This capability of the GI tract to mix and move material along its length is called motility (mō-TIL-i-tē).

4. Digestion. Mechanical and chemical processes break down ingested food into small molecules. In **mechanical digestion** the teeth cut and grind food before it is swallowed, and then smooth muscles of the stomach and small intestine churn the food to further assist the process. As a result, food molecules become dissolved and thoroughly mixed with digestive enzymes. In **chemical digestion** the large carbohydrate, lipid, protein, and nucleic acid molecules in food are split into smaller molecules by hydrolysis. Digestive enzymes produced by the salivary glands, tongue, stomach, pancreas, and small intestine catalyse these catabolic reactions. A few substances in food can be absorbed without chemical digestion. These include vitamins, ions, cholesterol, and water.

5. Absorption. The entrance of ingested and secreted fluids, ions, and the products of digestion into the epithelial cells lining the lumen of the GI tract is called absorption. The absorbed substances pass into blood or lymph and circulate to cells throughout the body.

6. Defecation. Wastes, indigestible substances, bacteria, cells sloughed from the lining of the GI tract, and digested materials that were not absorbed in their journey through the digestive tract leave the body through the anus in a process called defecation. The eliminated material is termed **faeces or stool**.

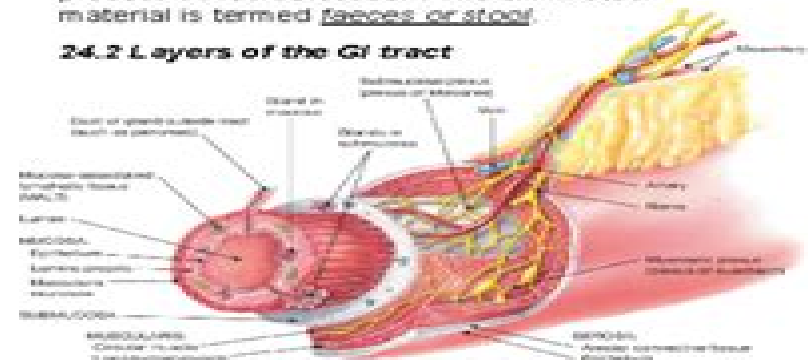
24.2 Layers of the GI tract



Overall, the digestive system performs six basic processes.

1. Ingestion. This process involves taking foods and liquids into the mouth (eating).

2. Secretion. Each day, cells within the walls of the GI tract and accessory digestive organs secrete a total of about 7 litres of water, acid, buffers, and enzymes into the lumen (interior space) of the tract.



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Camilla Rothe



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