

## **Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

### **Episode # 37: Meet Dr. Ashley Burkman, Naturopathic Physician**

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Hi, I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Dr. Ashley Burkman, who is a naturopathic physician at the Collaborative Natural Health Partners and has been part of this team for over six years now here in Connecticut. Her favorite part of working with this team is the strength there is in collaborating on patient care. While she treats a variety of health conditions her particular interests are in endocrinology, gastroenterology and autoimmune diseases.

Today I have invited Dr. Burkman here to talk about our gut biome, our gut health and our immune system because we're approaching the holidays. It's a great time to support our physical body while we're having fun with our family and friends.

So welcome Dr. Burkman.

DR. BURKMAN: Thank you for having me Judith. I'm really excited to be here.

JUDITH: Great. Tell us something about your journey into naturopathic health and perhaps a little bit about the focus of naturopathic care, just so we understand the differences between naturopathic care and western medicine.

DR. BURKMAN: Yes, so I always like to speak to my brand-new patients about what naturopaths are, even if they're like 'yep I've been to a naturopath.' I know what it is. I like to just give them a nice little background because I think naturopaths, we try to find the root of why something is happening. So instead of just putting Band-Aids on it and suppressing symptoms we're always looking to find why it's happening and what can we do to correct that permanently, so we don't have to worry about it any more.

So, for example, a patient may come in...I may have 10 patients in a day that come in for headache complaints and they may all walk out with a completely different looking treatment plan. One might be because they're a bit dehydrated that they're getting headaches. One might be because they're eating foods that might not be serving them. One could be stress, insomnia, a nutrient deficiency, a hormone imbalance. And so, we're all so very unique that there isn't really an algorithm that you can follow that will say, hey if someone has a headache you give them this medication and if that doesn't work you give them this medication and then you give them this one. We really have to listen to the patient's whole health history to kind of understand what's going to help them the most. I like to give people those kinds of examples, so they understand why they may have come in for jaw pain but I'm asking them about their bowel habits. I'm asking them about how many antibiotics have you had in your history. What was your mom's health like when she was pregnant with you? And these are all things that sometimes people are like, why do you need to know all this stuff? And I'm like, well it is very important for me to know to help direct why you're experiencing the symptoms that you're having. I think it makes it fun to be a naturopath because there are so many options. But it can also be difficult too because it's very hard to find the crux for the person. I think that's why I like working in a team, because we have so many other practitioners in our office that went to different universities across the country, so we get to kind of pull on each other's strengths that way whenever you feel like you get stuck. Because the second you feel stuck, you ask the team and there's like 700 other ways. And you're like, oh yeah, okay, there we go. That's the beauty of it. There's always an option. There's always something else to try, that's what I really enjoy about it.

JUDITH: Great. I like the idea that it's sort of not one size fits all but rather more individual because we are the individual in how we present the same symptom. And, as you mentioned, we have our mind, emotions, we have a spiritual nature and we have a physical body and we all interact and interface and interplay on that kind of bigger spectrum that makes us unique in a way.

DR. BURKMAN: Yeah, definitely.

JUDITH: Alright, well since we're getting into the holidays now, I know that a lot of folks get more stressed. We also have more parties. We also do the kind of eating that perhaps we don't usually do. It's very easy to be tempted. And I'd like to know more about the role our gut plays in all of this, especially with our immune system.

DR. BURKMAN: Yeah, so our immune system is made up of a matrix of cells that orchestrate together to prevent illness, fight off illness when we do succumb to something. And becoming ill is normal. I mean we can expect to get sick every once in awhile but there's definitely things we can do to prevent that from happening so frequently. The immune system does not work alone. It really takes cues from everything else going on in your body. So just as you had said, on the holidays we usually eat differently. We probably don't sleep as much as we should. We're probably a little bit more stressed you know around the holiday time financially or just emotionally and we're probably not exercising or doing the things that we normally would do. So, your immune system says, hey something is different. We don't normally live like this. We don't normally consume this much alcohol and that can stress the body out. Your immune system hears that noise from the adrenal system, the stress system, and will say we need to kick it up a notch. We need to work a little harder because clearly, we're under stress. We're running from some sort of bear so let's deal with that, so let's deal with that. When that occurs, your immune system can get tired. It can get kind of tired of doing that and it can only do it for so long before it starts to weaken. So, you know, the classic picture of a student whose going through mid terms or finals and they burn the candle at both ends. They don't sleep. They pretty much just caffeinate and don't eat well. They might get through finals, but they come home from school and they're sick for 2 weeks. So, your immune system is like 'this is really what we've been trying to help you get through but we really shouldn't have been doing that this whole time.' So if we really aren't taking care of our body in that way we're going to find that we're going to fall ill more. So specifically, how that relates to

the digestive system is that there's this nerve that connects our brain to our digestive system called the vagus nerve. When our body is under stress the brain will tell the digestive system we're under stress, but the digestive system will also tell the brain that we're under stress if we're eating inappropriately, having some inflammation in that digestive system. So, we really want to make sure that we are taking care of that ecosystem and our digestive tract in order to maintain a health immune system. It's kind of how they interplay with one another. But I think maintaining good health habits, trying not to veer to far from what you normally do, in fact, healthy, is the best thing you can do to prevent that immune system from getting overworked.

JUDITH: Well let's go into the digestive tract in particular because I'm fascinated by the gut biome. In the gardening world we're very, very concerned about the health of our soil and there's a lot of amendments, there's a lot of things we can do to create better soil even after we get through harvesting. How does that relate in our digestive tract with the foods that we eat, or the substances that we drink? How does that affect the health of our gut biome in a way that relates to the soil biome?

DR. BURKMAN: So, what's interesting is they finally showing, gardeners in particular, usually have a more robust healthy microbiome just because they're in the soil. And usually then you're eating the plants from the soil which is an added bonus. So, I mean we're meant to live in this symbiotic relationship with all of these bacteria and organisms in our environment. And so there are a few of them that can make us ill, like strep pneumonia or strep-throat and things like that. But normally, like over 90% of our actual cells on our body are not us. We're actually made up of healthy symbiotic bacteria, viruses and fungus. It's kind of mind blowing to think that that's really the case but really what it means, is we really need to be a healthy host for these guys. Like we don't want to be inflamed and scare them off, the good healthy bacteria and things that actually help us versus when we do eat in a more inflammatory way, meaning more sugar, more dehydrating beverages like over caffienating, over consuming alcohol. Those things all lead to an ecosystem that's not going to be as symbiotic or healthy for us. Everything in the digestive tract, the bugs are going to live depending on what we eat and what we do. Medications play a big role in this as well. People who are on long-term antacid medications or proton pump inhibitors for reflux disease, these (folks) have a different ecosystem, different microbiome makeup than people who aren't. People who have been

exposed to copious amounts of antibiotics have a different ecosystem than those who don't; those who eat animal meat and those who don't; those who eat plants and those who don't; it's really interesting how the whole balance of the microbiome can be shifted by little things. And really, recently, they've been doing a lot of research on how stress can affect that too. Stress of course from food but just psychological stress and not allowing our body to decompress will change that microbiome into more inflammatory type of biome that is not going to bode well for us, or our immune system.

JUDITH: No, it won't because the more inflammation that we have, doesn't that open the door to different diseases?

DR. BURKMAN: Definitely. So, it's been speculated that we have more asthma, allergies, eczema (we call it atopy), in individuals who especially start out their life maybe not being born vaginally, being born cesarean; maybe not being breastfed and then introducing food that is not appropriate before the age of six months and especially before the age of two years. We find that those are all reactions from the immune system. You're reacting to the environment with allergies, or your skin might be reacting. We also have a major burden in this country of an increase in autoimmune conditions, meaning our immune system glitches and starts to attack us. It can do that in our joints; it can do that to our nerves, it can do that to our organs. And again, we really want to home in on this and of course suppressing the process. We have to stop the immediate reaction but what is driving that? If we can change someone's ecosystem and their digestive tract, they are showing (studies) that there's better outcome, maybe even synergistically with medication or even without for managing some of those chronic illnesses. It's pretty incredible...I have a professor who lovingly called it the hole in the middle. Our whole digestive system is inner linked with everything. You talk about mental, emotional health. You talk about joint pain or anything, you really need to address that ecosystem, because if it's not working for us, it's going to work against us, and that's not what we want.

JUDITH: No, it isn't. I know in my world of wild edibles, one of the things I found very fascinating is that the herbs that are considered nervines happen to have an affect on the digestion. If we can calm the emotional part of us it affects our digestion. And then I found those herbs that seem to be more recommended for digestion happen to have an affect on the nervous system and help calm our emotional state. They have an inter-play with each other,

which is fascinating to me that the digestive system and our emotions have such an inter-relationship too, and that comes up at the holidays, you know? We get tired. We want to meet expectations for family and friends. We rush here; we rush there. And so, our emotions play into it as well. And I'm assuming, from your point of view that the gut biome affects how our body is responding, is what I'm trying to get at.

DR. BURKMAN: Yes, definitely. And it is an interesting piece that when you're given a nervine that's going to calm the mind, it'll calm down someone's digestive system. It's classic. There are a couple of herbs I really like that are great for irritable bowel syndrome or IBS which is really common, which is often a sign of stress on the body, anxiety. Somebody is going to manifest more cramping and increased bowel movements or bloating and digestive trouble. There's a combination called gentian and skullcap that classically you think of for calming the mind, which it does. It's great for the nervous system. But it's in a formula specific for IBS and so you take that before your meal so that your body is kind of purposefully switched into this rest and digest mode, so it's not in flight and flight mode. Even if, you know, we are all guilty of it, eating in the car or we're trying to eat while we're multi-tasking during work, your brain is saying: "We can't eat right now; we're not digesting; we're focusing on the task at hand." By doing something like that, taking your nervine or something that's going to calm the emotional state we'll say hey let's shut some blood flow and let's focus on breaking this food down. And it's kind of incredible how well that can work, just that alone. Of course, changing people's behavior, teaching them to be mindful, taking a step to just take a couple of breathes before you go ahead and eat your food. But herbs can really be powerful in that way and can really make a big difference in your digestion.

JUDITH: So, the herbs have that kind of an effect and you find them effective, what else do you feel is really good to support a good healthy gut?

DR. BURKMAN: So, #1 we want to avoid antibiotics, which I know is not wholly possible, especially here in Connecticut. We are in Lyme country and antibiotics are necessary to get rid of chronic illness at times but really, we want to stop killing off our good guys and stopping antibiotics are the first way that you can do that. We want to definitely address food, and I think it's such a critical piece, especially whenever you're talking about young kids. It's hard; I get it. It's hard for us to change our own diets and our own life style habits because that's our ritual. That's what we're used to. But

especially a parent whose worn down and the kids don't want to choose to try the broccoli or whatever. I get that that can be difficult. But it is an imperative piece that we teach young kids to start to explore things and maybe teach them to cook or teach them to enjoy food prep. You know, make it fun so that we actually eat these vegetables, because it is very important that we eat fiber to keep that digestive ecosystem happy. It's kind of amazing how we can really eat a very calorie dense diet and avoid a lot of fiber. So, it's almost hard to, but I mean if you're a pasta lover and you're just eating mac and cheese and pizza and cereal all day then you don't get in much fiber that the plants can offer you. And hydrating of course, making sure we're drinking plenty of water. That is the essential for clearing toxins from our body and helping our body find balance. Sleep is a very important piece to our microbiome. As with anything, if we're not sleeping, we're not restoring and so our digestive tract does take a break at night. I mean we fast at night so that's time for it to restore as well. Which is why it is important not to eat a giant meal before bed because your body is not going to have time to really focus on breaking down those nutrients. It's going to be focusing on trying to rest and relax. And stress managing. By doing all these other things: eating well, hydrating, sleeping, you're usually going to be helping your stress level but sometimes, you know, finding a hobby that's going to be relaxing or exercising which is always of course good for the digestive system, to make sure that you're eliminating regularly. I guess that is kind of the bottom line. You want to have enough fiber, water, restoration time for the gut and movement so that you actually do have regular bowel movements which is you know, not everyone's favorite topic to talk about or to acknowledge when they come into the office, but we do spend a lot of time talking about frequency, texture, urgency, quality. All of those things tell me sometime about what may be missing either in their diet or in their lifestyle.

JUDITH: Yes, I agree with you. I've had a lot of experience in the naturopathic world and the holistic world, We don't realize how important elimination is and how we're eliminating. People who make the mark, so to speak, tend to feel healthier than those folks that have, that are not on the mark one way or the other either too much diarrhea, too much constipation, etc. I taught for a number of years at a local university and I did holistic health classes and I was amazed at how little fiber some of the students ate. And one of the things I had them do was pick one common dish from a fast food restaurant, broke them up into five groups. We did five fast food restaurants. They had to look at the calories, the salt, the fat, the sugar, the

fiber as well as the number of ingredients it takes to make that dish and they were absolutely amazed. Their eyes really opened at what's missing. You know some of these fast foods have one hundred different ingredients in that particular dish, as well as high fat, high salt, made with processed goods, processed ingredients and no fiber to speak of, you know? I think these are really good tips. And again, from my own experience, I saw a lot of that with the students. And I understand it. They're busy. They grab a fast food meal and I'm sure you see that in the population that comes to you, you know? Fast food makes it easy for us to get the grab on the go.

DR. BURKMAN: Yeah. It's a lot of education. I think giving people resources is what's helpful and it's only fair because I don't like to just take things away. I like to add things in. So, I might be saying you're getting a lot of dairy in your diet and you're telling me you're gassy and moody a lot. It sounds like that might not be working well for you and we can do a lot of fancy testing or we could just eliminate it and see how you feel. And then you know, even with kids the parents will say, but I love dairy so how could I cut that out of their diet? I love cheese. I love ice cream. And I'm like, I bet that you do and I'm sure that's part of why your child is loving it so much to but let's find some alternatives. Let's not think about cutting something out. Here's a list of all the different dairy free options that you can just replace so you can see if that makes a difference. I think framing it in a way that first of all educates them. It's an ingenious idea to be like there's no fiber in this. What's the nutritional value? This is just a chemical burger that you're eating, so obviously when they see that they're going to think about that before they make that next decision. So, educating and giving a lot of alternatives and options is a way to help people and nudge them in the right direction.

JUDITH: I agree. Do you have any specific recommendations going into the holiday season based on our discussion? I mean you gave us some good thoughts right now in terms of high fiber, hydration, sleep and maybe exercising. But do you have any other food suggestions that might be really helpful for the holidays? Like what could we do instead of, I know sweet potatoes and marshmallows go together at Thanksgiving. Do you have any other types of suggestions for folks?

DR. BURKMAN: Do you know what I love to do, even personally? I will look on pintrest or Google or whatever and look for Paleo recipes because most of the time Paleo recipes, even if somebody can allow themselves to

have grains, they're going to have higher protein content. They're going to use things like almond flour and nut flours, things that are going to have higher protein. And they usually have less sugar in them and they're still just as delicious. One of my favorite things to make is something called **cashew date bars**. It's basically like making your own Lara bar but without any extra ingredients. You just mix some cashews, equal parts cashews, pitted dates and coconut flakes with a little bit of vanilla and a little bit of salt into a food processor and then you press it out into a pan and put it in the fridge and cut it into little bites. And I can't tell you how many times people are like, I need to know the recipe. This seems so difficult. And when I tell them how simple it was, I'm like 'I just got this off of some Paleo website and it's delicious.' So, you do think of sweets this time of year so not totally not being able to indulge in any, but maybe picking things that are going to be higher fiber? Like (recipe) that's going to have boatloads of fiber between the coconut flakes and the dates and have more nutritional value than just eating, you know, a sugar cookie. And I get it. It's tradition and you want to decorate them and that's fine but then having other things available that you can choose that are going to be healthier.

JUDITH: Yeah and that's a great suggestion because some of my listeners are sensitive and they are following either a Paleo or Vegan, or whatever. That's a great recipe for them to offer, to bring, so that they have a choice but then it opens up the door for everybody else in the family to try something that perhaps they wouldn't try. Thank you for that. That's a great suggestion.

DR. BURKMAN: Yeah. It is hard whenever you know that grandma is going to have her Christmas ham and her whatever. They're going to have their set-up of everything that they're going to have but you know it doesn't mean that you have to abstain. Just let the host know that you're going to maybe bring some extra things, not because you don't like what they make but that you're trying to restrict certain things. And people most of the time are very open to that and they're like, great I don't have to make dessert. I would love for you to bring whatever. It is weird at first but just being your own advocate and saying I'd love to bring the pumpkin pie. I want to make sure, whatever, there's no dairy in it or organic pumpkin and then you can still enjoy and everybody else can too.

JUDITH: Yeah that's great. I really like that.

Well before we leave do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share before we go into your contact information?

DR. BURKMAN: Yes. So, we talked about all of the basics; the **sleep**, **hydrating**, you know making sure we're still **getting physical movement** and trying to **de-stress**. Those are kind of like the foundations of naturopathic medicine, so I always like to make those reiterated. But something that you can ask your doctor to check you for is Vitamin D levels. Here in New England we live so far away from the equator that we're just not going to get the type of Vitamin D or sun exposure that would allow us to make Vitamin D as we would if we lived closer to the equator. There are studies showing that low Vitamin D levels increase your risk of flu, viral infection and also depression – seasonal affective disorder or SAD, in the winter. If you can simply have your Vitamin D level tested and then supplement appropriately, that can really make a big difference in your immune system and also just how you feel. It is a fat-soluble vitamin, so you can safely take smaller doses probably just outright, but you do kind of want to know where you stand because you might be taking a pretty good dose and it might not be enough for you or it might be way too much for you. Having that test is a quick, easy test and most doctors will order that.

JUDITH: Great, thank you. Because we are in the midst of fall, winter's coming, the light is changing, and we don't get those rays that help our Vitamin D level here in New England.

Do you recommend a tanning bed that has the Vitamin D producing lights?

DR. BURKMAN: Well I don't usually recommend tanning beds just for the UV radiation and the damage to the melanocytes in the skin, but there is some truth to, I don't know so much about Vitamin D production, but they do have the seasonal affected (SAD) sunlamps that they sell. You know you can get them on discount at Bed Bath and Beyond. You can buy them on Amazon and there is like, if you wake up in the morning and you turn that puppy on, especially here soon we're going to be doing daylight savings switching around, that can really mimic the sunlight. It also helps reduce stress and boost your cortisol, so you have a little bit more energy. But unfortunately, Vitamin D sources are naturally from the sun or fat-soluble source like animals that have also been in the sun. If you're eating beef that was raised in a barn and hasn't been exposed to sun, they're going to be devoid of Vitamin D. And you could eat loads and loads of animal meats

and maybe still not get enough. So, and that's not my recommendation to do that, usually we have to supplement for vitamin D in order to get plenty of it.

JUDITH: Great, thank you. Thank you for clarifying that as well. Before we go how about leaving us with your contact information.

DR. BURKMAN: You can contact us through our website at [www.Ctnaturalhealth.com](http://www.Ctnaturalhealth.com) and there's a contact us link there. You can see all of the bios of all of our practitioners and you'll find me on there as well. Our main office is located in Manchester, CT but we also just recently opened up two satellite locations, one in West Hartford and one in Stonington. We're trying to become more accessible for patients across CT. So that's us and I encourage you to check out our website. We do have a blog on our website where we try to incorporate what we're talking about now, lifestyle things that you can switch up, seasonal foods, that kind of thing so you can find some information on there.

JUDITH: You're a great resource, that's for sure. We're lucky here in this neck of the woods to have you folks.

DR. BURKMAN: Well thank you.

JUDITH: Well I want to thank you again for participating in the Holistic Nature of Us. And I know I'm inspired. You gave very practical advice and you also clarified a couple of issues that I think will be really relevant for the holiday season, so thank you again. And thank you for joining me today.

DR. BURKMAN: Yes, thank you so much Judith. I really appreciate it.

JUDITH: This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website [www.judithdreyer.com](http://www.judithdreyer.com) as well as several distribution arms, such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. We'll have the recipe included and the contact information. Please like and share these podcasts. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, NOW is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.

