- Digestion

IN FOCUS

What Happens WHEN YOU EAT

BY LIZ KRIEGER

MMM...GARLIC. OR MAYBE BUTTER AND SUGAR. When a yummy smell wafts from the kitchen, your digestive system kicks into gear. Starting with your tongue and ending with your colon, "it's an amazingly complex system," says Chris South, M.D., a gastroenterologist at Gastro Health, in Ohio. "The digestive system has many zones and organs, all united in the same goal: to turn food into fuel by extracting the nutrients we need." **Here's how it all goes down.**

1. EYES

Behold, a gooey wedge of Death by Chocolate! When you visually take note of the texture, color, and shape, all of a sudden you want it, even if you weren't craving cake before.

2. NOSE

Scent receptors register aroma, and this may lead you to salivate.

3. MOUTH

The saliva pooling in there contains the enzyme amylase, which starts digesting the cake as soon as it makes it onto your tongue. The liquid also helps lubricate the food and mold it to slide into the pharynx (your throat).

4. EPIGLOTTIS

When you swallow, it covers your trachea, keeping that cake from going down the "wrong pipe" and toward your lungs (cough!). When all goes well, the food heads through the upper esophageal sphincter, a ring-shaped muscle, and then into the esophagus.

5. ESOPHAGUS

Involuntary muscle contractions called peristalsis keep the food moving along. Then the sphincter at the bottom of your esophagus opens up to allow the food into your stomach.

6. STOMACH

Welcome to the hydrochloric acid bathtub! Here, muscle contractions grind stuff up even more and ready it to travel to the small intestine. In most cases, what has been eaten leaves the stomach within three hours.

7. PANCREAS and LIVER

The pancreas (*not shown*) shoots juices

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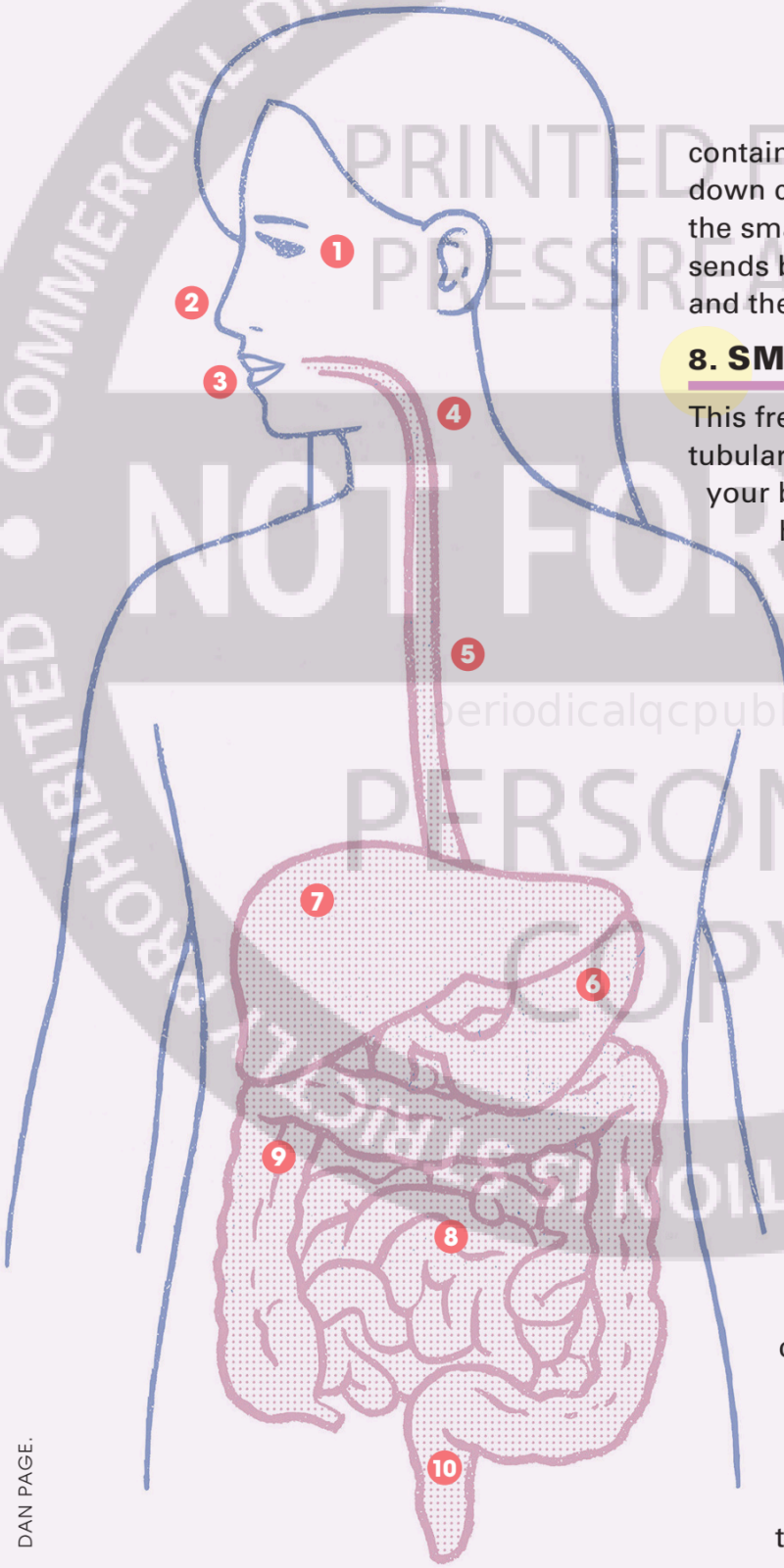

DAN PAGE.

containing enzymes to break down carbs, fat, and protein into the small intestine. The liver sends bile, via the gallbladder and the bile ducts, to digest fat.

8. SMALL INTESTINE

This freakishly long (20 feet!) tubular organ is where the bulk of your body's nutrient absorption happens, via fingerlike projections (villi) that cover the insides of the coils.

9. LARGE INTESTINE

Also known as your colon and at least four feet long, it absorbs water from food, turning what's left into poop. And it's where trillions of (mostly good) bacteria help finish digestion and make certain vitamins.

10. RECTUM

This area of the colon is where waste waits before being released. A lot of nerves are here, and they alert you when it's full and when you need to find a bathroom.

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