

Family Health Care

# Counselor

## Keeping Things Running Without a Hitch (or Belch).

Your gastrointestinal tract is a 30-foot-long, twisting tube that begins at your mouth and ends at your anus. Its job is to propel food along its entire course to carry out the process of digestion and absorb nutrients. This involves a finely coordinated effort between various abdominal organs. When things go wrong, you'll usually know it through discomfort, bloating, and going to the washroom more frequently than you'd like. Don't ignore symptoms if they go on too long, a well-running digestive system is crucial to good health. Fortunately, there is much you can do to keep things running smoothly.



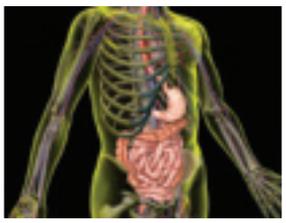
# Helping to Prevent Digestive Problems

# Digestive Health

## Factors Affecting Your Digestive Health

It could be your stomach reacting to the double cheeseburger and fries you ate too quickly. Or it could be a long-standing disorder that causes you acute discomfort and even interferes with your work and social life. Whether the problem is occasional or chronic, digestive ailments are among our most common conditions.

Digestion is the process of breaking down food into smaller bits so that nutrients can be absorbed, and waste eliminated. While many interconnected organs play a role in this process, three main organs are key players in digestion – and digestive problems.



Your **stomach** is a sack-like organ that mixes food and breaks it up. It does this by secreting powerful gastric acids that break

food down into simple particles that the gut can absorb more easily. One such acid is hydrochloric acid, which can burn a hole in a carpet. Because of this, the stomach is protected by a thick mucus lining which keeps it from being eroded.

After your stomach digests your food, it is sent to your **small intestine**, which is mainly responsible for breaking down nutrients further so that they can be absorbed into your bloodstream. The final stages of digestion take place in your **large intestine**, which helps break down what's left of the food, turning it into a semi-solid waste. This waste is then formed into feces and pushed down to your rectum for elimination.

## When Things Go Wrong

Common digestive problems include heartburn/GERD, constipation, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Symptoms may include bloating, diarrhea, stomach pain and cramps.

What triggers digestive upsets? Many things. They can be the result of food intolerances, infection, certain medications or a pre-existing medical condition. The foods you eat (e.g. dairy products) and the way you eat (e.g. gulping down food) can all cause problems to flare up.

Stress is also a big culprit. This is because your gastrointestinal tract is directly wired to the neurons in your brain. When your brain detects any kind of threat, it shoots stress hormones to your gut. This is why your stomach literally starts to clench or rumble when you're anxious or upset.

Not only can digestive problems make us miserable, some people understandably find symptoms such as gas or diarrhea embarrassing. Yet they can be symptoms of more serious problems, and can cause poor absorption of the nutrients needed to maintain good health. Check with your doctor if troublesome symptoms go on for too long. *Never let embarrassment get in the way of getting a proper diagnosis.*

The good news is that most digestive complaints can be managed with a combination of medications, and a few diet and lifestyle changes. In some cases, it may be as simple as eating more slowly to get things running again.

## Heartburn/GERD How to Not Feel the Burn

Your esophagus is a tube that carries food from your mouth to stomach. At the juncture, where the two meet, there is a small valve called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). When food needs to get into the stomach, the LES relaxes and opens, allowing it in. Then it squeezes shut. Heartburn, also known as Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) occurs when the LES relaxes at the wrong time, allowing acid from the stomach to flow back up your esophagus.

Unlike your stomach, your esophagus has only a thin mucus lining. So when those harsh digestive acids enter your esophagus, you'll feel a burning pain behind your breastbone.

The causes of heartburn vary. Carrying extra weight can exert force on the LES. Pregnant women tend to get heartburn more often because hormonal changes can weaken the LES muscles. Certain medications, such as asthma or hypertensive drugs, can also trigger heartburn. But most often foods are triggers, along with orange juice, tomatoes, spicy foods and coffee – both caffeinated and decaf – as the main culprits.

Over-the-counter antacids are the most common medication for heartburn. If your symptoms are especially bothersome, you can try a proton pump inhibitor (PPI), which reduces acid production. Most PPIs are available by prescription only, but some brands are available over-the-counter.

Dietary changes can help as well. For example, eating smaller meals more frequently throughout the day can help your stomach secrete less acid. So can natural supplements such as digestive enzymes. Ask your Family Health Care pharmacist about appropriate remedies or whether any prescription medications you are taking could be causing the burn.



## Ulcers: Feeling the Pain

An ulcer occurs when the protective lining of your stomach gets eroded and damaged. They can be triggered by nicotine, alcohol, fatty and spicy foods, and a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) that makes the stomach more susceptible to harsh digestive acids.

Medications too, can be a contributing factor. The most common are nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which many people take for arthritis. If you need to take NSAIDs frequently and regularly, take them with an antacid or food to buffer the stomach.

Ulcers rarely go away by themselves, and may require antibiotic treatment to eradicate the *H. pylori* bacteria. Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs), which reduce the production of stomach acids, are also used to heal ulcers. Be sure to check with your Family Health Care pharmacist about the appropriate ways to take your medications.

### Stomach Ulcer Symptoms vs Simple Heartburn

The symptoms of stomach ulcers and heartburn are very similar, causing many people to confuse the two. However, ulcer symptoms are usually worse on an empty stomach, and get better after eating, whereas heartburn usually flares up after mealtimes. Plus, most people feel ulcer pain around their stomachs, while heartburn is typically felt in the chest.

# Digestive Health

## Constipation Moving Towards Regularity

Constipation is defined as a decrease in your usual number of bowel movements. However, if things aren't moving along as much as you'd like, you're not alone. According to statistics, constipation is one of the most frequent gastrointestinal complaints.

In most cases, it's a simple matter of not getting enough fibre. Fibre absorbs water and helps move food and water through your gastrointestinal tract more quickly. Apples, prunes, oat bran, carrots and kidney beans are all good sources of fibre. Increase your intake gradually because too much fibre too fast can cause gassiness, bloating and diarrhea.

If you have difficulty digesting dietary fibre, supplements can also help. Look for those that contain psyllium husk, which can increase the bulk in your stool, making it easier to pass.

As for laxatives, there are many varieties available over-the-counter. However, using laxatives excessively can make your bowel lazy, which can cause you to become dependent on them for regular movements. If you are using laxatives, follow all the directions on the product package. Never increase your dose or take them more often than directed. Your Family Health Care pharmacist can also advise you on supplements and natural remedies that can get things moving again.

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome The Gut-Wrenching Condition

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a disorder that affects your large intestine or colon. Symptoms include alternating constipation and diarrhea, gas, bloating, unformed stools and sometimes cramps followed by an urgent need to have a bowel movement. These symptoms vary in frequency and severity from person to person. In extreme cases, IBS can seriously interfere with your quality of life, forcing you to stay home from work, or decline any social activity that requires you to be too far away from a bathroom.

The problem originates with the muscles in your colon that squeeze to push stool through to your rectum. When these muscles become impaired, they either contract too quickly, giving you diarrhea, or move too slowly, causing constipation. Although the exact cause is unknown, experts believe that IBS is probably related to stress and food intolerances.

Fortunately, medication and dietary changes can help control symptoms and keep them from affecting your life. Medications include fibre supplements or laxatives to relieve constipation, medicines to decrease diarrhea, and antispasmodics to relieve muscle spasms in the colon. Probiotics can also alleviate some symptoms such as constipation by helping to regulate the balance of good bacteria in your gut.

Learning to manage stress is crucial too. Although everyday upsets don't actually cause IBS, these stresses can make it worse. Yoga and relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and mindfulness have been shown to help lessen IBS symptoms. As well, aerobic exercise like jogging can help make your colon muscles work better and move gas through your gastrointestinal tract faster.

## Eating Well for Digestive Health

It makes sense that good digestion is largely dependent on good eating habits. The fact is that many people who have tummy troubles often don't eat well and tend to eat on the run. Eating too quickly can cause you to gulp down air, which will make you feel gassy. That's why one simple solution to digestive problems is to just slow down and chew your food thoroughly, so your stomach doesn't have to work as hard to break it down. Cutting down on fat and eating fibre-rich foods can also help.

Of course, this will be of little help if you have intolerances to certain foods. Top culprits are wheat, gluten, dairy and yeast. Ignoring a food intolerance is a bad idea because it can weaken your body's ability to properly digest and absorb essential nutrients – so it's important to identify them. One way to detect food intolerances is by going on an elimination diet for a few weeks, and seeing if certain foods bother you. You can also ask your doctor about a new blood test that checks your reactions to common foods.

### Giving Bacteria a Boost

Another way to ensure good gut reactions is with probiotics, which promote intestinal health. Your large intestine is home to trillions of bacteria, some beneficial, others harmful. The good ones help keep bowel function regular, break down hard-to-digest foods, and even strengthen your immune system. The key is for the good bacteria to outnumber the bad. This is why many experts recommend taking probiotics.

Although probiotics are available in many products and supplements, not all are equally effective. Look for products that say "live and active" cultures, and contain strains of Lactobacillus and Bifidobacteria. Your Family Health Care pharmacist can help you choose the kinds that are most useful to you.



# Q & A

## Ask Your Helpful Family Health Care Pharmacist

### Q. Antibiotics give me diarrhea. Is this serious?

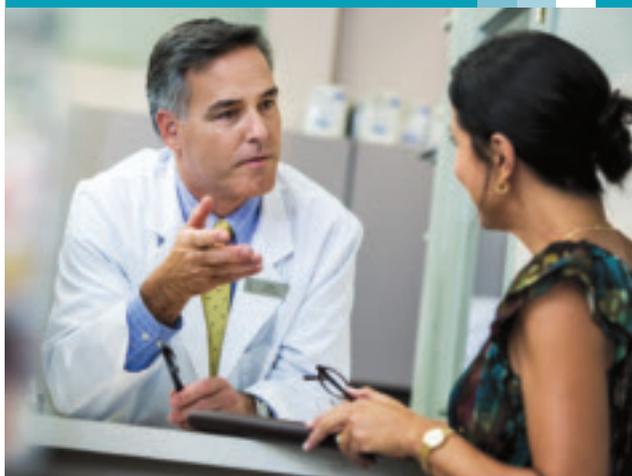
A. Frequent, watery bowel movements are a common side effect of many antibiotics used to treat bacterial infections. Usually it clears up shortly after you stop taking the medication. However, in some cases, antibiotic-associated diarrhea can lead to colitis, an inflammation of the colon. See your doctor if you're experiencing abdominal pain, fever and bloody diarrhea. You may need to stop taking that particular antibiotic or switch to another brand.

### Q. What are the best natural remedies for indigestion?

A. Ginger is an excellent natural tonic. Whether it's used in a tea or ground up in supplement form, it can help relieve gas, bloating and cramps. As well, some people are deficient in certain types of digestive enzymes that are responsible for breaking down the sugars and starches in foods. If fibre-rich foods such as beans, broccoli, bran and cabbage make you too gassy, enzyme supplements can help stop gas before it starts. Look for drops or tablets containing alpha-galactosidase.

### Q. I'm beginning to experience rectal pain after a large bowel movement. Is this normal?

A. It depends. Hemorrhoids, which are enlarged or varicose veins in your rectal area, are the most common cause of rectal pain. Hard, dry stools can also irritate hemorrhoids and cause bleeding. Medications that lessen friction and irritation can help, as can softening your stools by drinking eight glasses of water a day. However, no matter how obvious the cause of your rectal pain, never make the diagnosis yourself – especially if you have noted any changes in the quality and frequency of your bowel movements. See your doctor or a gastroenterologist who can diagnose your problem accurately.



## Digestive Problems – Assessing your Risk

If you suffer from digestive upsets often, there are a number of tests that can determine the reason for your problems. You can try to pinpoint your own triggers by answering the following questions, and bringing the information to your doctor if necessary.

- What foods, beverages, and/or eating patterns cause your digestive problems to flare up?
- Which medications (prescription and over-the-counter) seem to upset your digestive tract?
- Do certain situations and events seem to trigger problems? For example, many women experience constipation before their periods due to hormonal changes.
- Are you overweight? Many gastrointestinal ailments such as heartburn and indigestion are linked to carrying extra pounds.
- Are you getting enough exercise? Even a 20-minute stroll can help reduce bloating, gas and constipation by optimizing the passage of waste through your bowels.

### ***Important!***

*You shouldn't stress about every cramp and painful bout of diarrhea. However, the sudden onset of severe, unfamiliar abdominal pain is a **signal for you to get help immediately**. The reason for this urgency is that many of your abdominal organs – your stomach and intestines, for example – are hollow. If one of them bursts or leaks, your life may be in danger.*

### ***Take The Check-Up Challenge***

As with many health problems, the majority of digestive dilemmas can be managed with a few lifestyle and dietary changes. But if symptoms are interfering too much with your everyday life, be sure to see your doctor for a check-up.

## Ask About Our Preferred® Private Label Products That May Aid In Preventing Digestive Problems!

## Next Month's Feature!

APRIL 2014

### ***Women's Health***

As the childbearing sex, women have their share of unique health issues. Not surprisingly, many are linked to hormonal issues, such as painful periods, skin conditions, mood swings or bone density changes after menopause. Fortunately women now have more personal health care choices, from medications to lifestyle changes that can help protect their health at any age.

In Next Month's Feature Find Out More About:

- Common health conditions for women
- Cutting your risks of certain cancers
- The hidden risks of belly fat
- Optimum bone health
- How to deal with the changes of menopause
- Daily Supplements

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