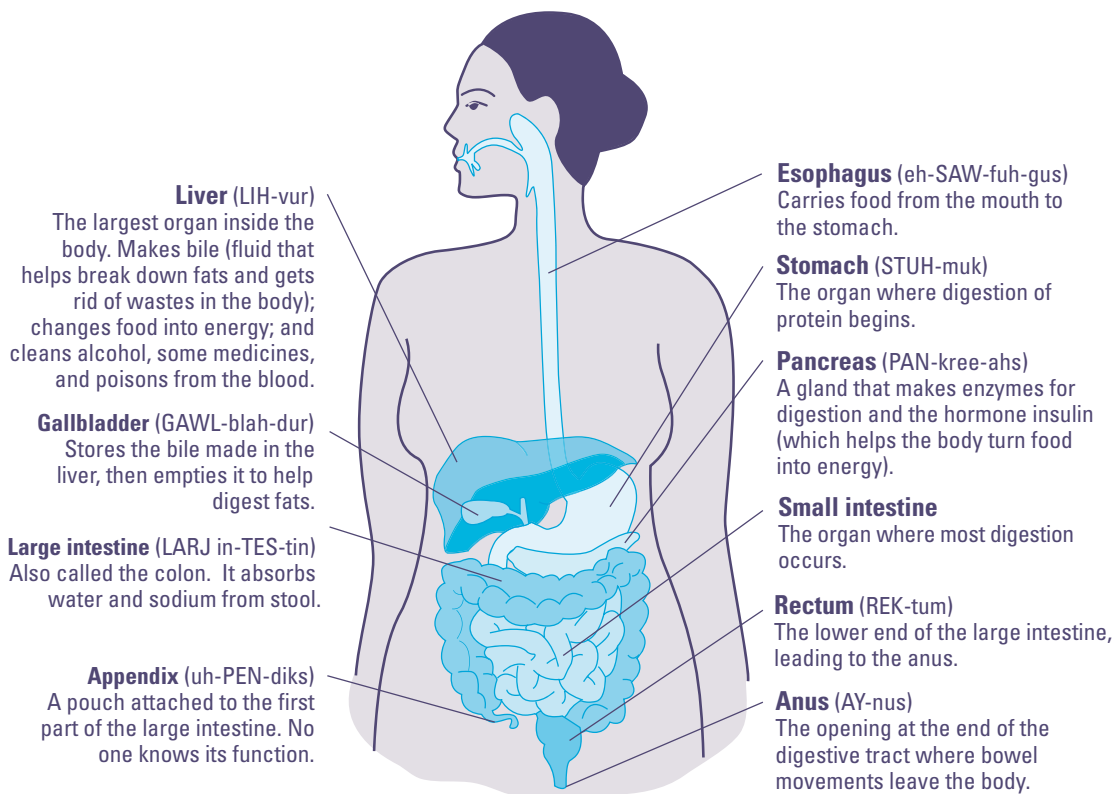


# Maintaining a Healthy Digestive System

**H**earthburn, gas, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation. We don't like to tell others we're having these problems! We tend to suffer in silence, hoping that our discomfort will end soon. Although these symptoms could be caused by a stomach "bug," or something we ate, they also could be signs of serious health problems. Some problems in our digestive system have no known cause, but they can usually be treated.

## Your Digestive System

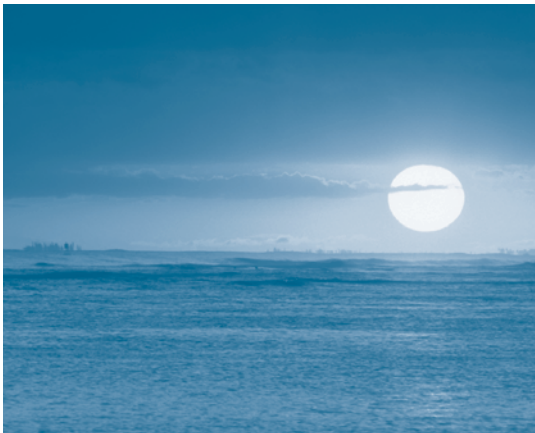


## Common Digestive Diseases and Syndromes

**Inflammatory [in-FLAM-uh-toh-ree] bowel disease (IBD).** IBD is a long-term disease that causes a swollen small intestine and colon. When these tissues become inflamed or swollen, sores (ulcers) form and bleed. No one knows for sure what causes IBD, but researchers suspect it may be a bacterium (germ) or virus. A genetic component may also play a role. It most often occurs in young people before age 40.

Common symptoms of IBD are

- ◆ diarrhea that can be bloody
- ◆ bleeding from your rectum
- ◆ mucus (a clear liquid) in your stool
- ◆ nausea (the feeling of wanting to throw up) and vomiting (throwing up)
- ◆ fever
- ◆ weight loss without a certain reason



- ◆ pain and tenderness in the lower right side of your abdomen
- ◆ slowed growth and delayed sexual development (in children)

### Two of the Most Common Forms of IBD

- ◆ Ulcerative [UL-sur-ay-tuv] colitis [koh-LY-tis]. It causes inflammation and ulcers in the lining of the large intestine (colon) or rectum.
- ◆ Crohn's [krohnz] disease. It causes irritation deeper within the intestinal wall. It usually occurs in the small intestine. It can also occur in the mouth, esophagus, stomach, duodenum, large intestine, appendix, and anus.

**Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). IBS is not a disease.** It describes discomfort and other symptoms in the digestive tract, mainly affecting the colon (large intestine). It is a problem in which the colon does not work as it should. IBS does not hurt the intestines and does not lead to colon cancer. It is not related to Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. IBS doesn't cause damage to the digestive tract. The cause of IBS is not known, and as yet there is no cure.

Common symptoms of IBS are

- ◆ gas
- ◆ bloating (feeling of fullness in your abdomen)
- ◆ burping
- ◆ abdominal (stomach) pain
- ◆ diarrhea (frequent loose stools)
- ◆ constipation (infrequent stools that may be hard, dry, and painful to pass)
- ◆ alternating constipation and diarrhea
- ◆ feeling like you don't have complete bowel movements
- ◆ feeling a crampy urge to move the bowels but cannot do so
- ◆ mucus (a clear liquid) in the stool

**Gastroesophageal [gastro-eh-saw-fuh-JEE-ul ] reflux disease (GERD).** This disease occurs when the muscle between the esophagus (food pipe) and the stomach relaxes. This muscle acts like a door to the stomach. The door opens for food from



the esophagus. The door should close after the food goes into the stomach. When the "door" muscle doesn't work correctly, stomach contents splash back into the esophagus. This action is called reflux.

Heartburn, which feels like a burning deep in the throat or near the mouth, is the most common symptom of GERD. Mild heartburn can often be controlled through diet by not eating certain types of foods or not drinking alcohol. It can often be controlled by eating smaller and more frequent meals throughout the day.

Common symptoms of GERD are

- ◆ heartburn
- ◆ needing to clear your throat a lot more than usual



- ◆ problems swallowing
- ◆ feeling that food is stuck in your throat
- ◆ a burning feeling in your mouth
- ◆ pain in the chest

Long-term heartburn can wear away the lining of the esophagus. If you have this condition, get examined by your doctor or nurse. Anyone who has heartburn twice a week or more may have GERD. But you can have GERD without having heartburn. Having GERD increases your risk of esophageal cancer.

In infants and children, GERD may cause repeated vomiting, coughing, and other respiratory problems. Most babies grow out of GERD by their first birthday. Still, you should talk to your child's doctor if his or her symptoms occur regularly and cause discomfort.

### Symptoms That May Be Signs of More Serious Health Problems

**Call your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms.**

- Sharp and sudden stomach pain
- Stomach pain that doesn't go away
- Bloody stools (that can be either bright red or very black)
- Bleeding from your rectum or pain in your rectum
- Bloody vomit that looks like coffee grounds
- Unexplained weight loss
- Constant and extreme fatigue
- A change in your normal bowel movements that lasts longer than 10 to 14 days or that does not get back to normal with over-the-counter medicines





## Tests and Treatments

### Step 1

A physical exam is the first step in finding out if you have a digestive disease. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms: when they started, when and how often they occur, how long they last. You will also be asked about your bowel habits, diet, and medications you might be taking. The history and tests may rule out other health problems to make sure they aren't the cause of your symptoms.

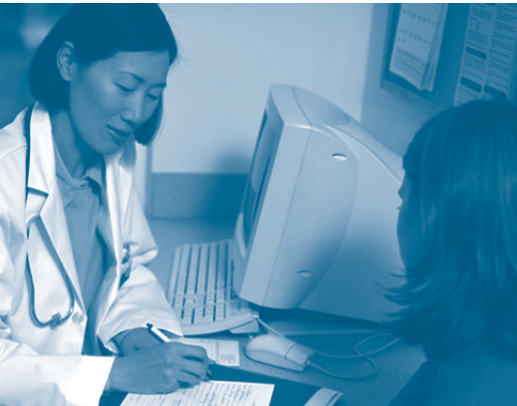


### Step 2

In many cases, your doctor will treat your symptoms and then ask you to make lifestyle changes.

What changes might I be asked to make?

- ◆ Change your diet. You may be asked to not eat certain types of foods or to not drink alcohol. You may be advised to eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day.
- ◆ Quit smoking.
- ◆ Reduce stress.
- ◆ Get regular physical activity.



### Step 3

If your symptoms do not improve, you may need one or more tests, depending on your symptoms. Once your doctor figures out what your health problem is, treatment can begin. Medicines are usually the first treatments. Your doctor might suggest surgery if you have a more severe problem that is not helped by medicines.

<b>Disease/ Syndrome</b>	<b>Tests</b>	<b>Treatment</b>
Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blood and stool samples: Look for blood or infection.</li> <li>• Barium [BAIR-ee-um] enema [EN-uh-muh] x-ray: Looks for problems in the colon. A doctor puts barium into your colon through the anus. Then x-rays are taken.</li> <li>• Colonoscopy [koh-luh-NAW-skuh-pee] or sigmoidoscopy [SIG-moy-DAW-skuh-pee]: Looks for problems in the lining of the colon. A thin, flexible tube is put into the colon through the anus.</li> <li>• Upper gastrointestinal [GAH-stroh-in-TES-tuh-nul] (GI) series: Looks for problems in the small intestine. You drink a liquid, and then x-rays are taken.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medicines to control inflammation and relieve symptoms</li> <li>• Surgery to remove the colon or diseased parts of the intestines</li> </ul>
Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blood and stool samples: Look for blood or infection.</li> <li>• Barium enema x-ray: Looks for problems in the colon. A doctor puts barium into your colon through the anus. Then x-rays are taken.</li> <li>• Colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy: Looks for problems in the lining of the colon. A thin, flexible tube is put into the colon through the anus.</li> </ul> <p>These tests are performed to help rule out diseases that have symptoms similar to IBS.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medicines to relieve symptoms</li> </ul>

Disease/ Syndrome	Tests	Treatment
Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barium swallow radiograph: Looks for problems with how the esophagus is working. You drink a liquid, and then x-rays are taken.</li> <li>• Upper endoscopy: Looks for problems and inflammation of the esophagus. Your throat is numbed. A thin tube that has a tiny camera is then put down your throat.</li> <li>• pH-monitoring exam: Looks at what goes on when stomach acid comes up into your esophagus. A tiny tube is placed into the esophagus for 24 hours.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medicines to control your body from making too much acid and to relieve symptoms</li> <li>• Medicines to make the stomach empty faster</li> <li>• In severe cases, surgery to strengthen and repair stomach muscles</li> </ul>

### Steps You Can Take for a Healthy Digestive System

In addition to working with your doctor and taking medicines to control your symptoms, here are other steps you can take.

- ◆ Try to limit the foods you eat that cause your symptoms to flare up. Before you change your diet, however, keep a journal noting the foods that seem to cause you distress. Then discuss your findings with your doctor. You may also want to consult a **r**egistered **d**ietitian (RD), who can help you make changes to your diet. For example, if dairy products cause your symptoms to flare up, try eating less of those foods. Dairy products are an important source of calcium and other nutrients, though. If you need to avoid them, be sure to get enough calcium and nutrients in other foods.
- ◆ Eat smaller, more frequent meals. Large meals can cause cramping and diarrhea in people with irritable bowel syndrome.
- ◆ Eat a diet low in saturated fat.
- ◆ Eat a diet high in fiber. In many cases, fiber helps lessen constipation. But fiber may not help diarrhea or pain. Whole-grain breads and cereals, fruit, and vegetables are good sources of fiber. High-fiber diets may cause gas and bloating at first, but these symptoms often go away within a few weeks as your body adjusts.
- ◆ Try to drink six to eight glasses of plain water each day, especially if you have diarrhea. Carbonated drinks, such as sodas, may cause gas and stomach discomfort. Chewing gum and eating too quickly can lead to swallowing air, which again leads to gas.



- ◆ Ask your doctor if you should take vitamins or supplements.
- ◆ Try to stay at a healthy weight. Talk with your doctor about what a healthy weight is for you.
- ◆ If you drink alcohol, do not have more than one drink per day, or stop drinking altogether.
- ◆ If you smoke, quit.
- ◆ Get regular physical activity. At least 30 minutes on most days of the week can greatly improve your health!
- ◆ Control your stress. Many people think stress alone can cause digestive problems, but that's not true. But sometimes stress and emotions can trigger some symptoms and also make them feel worse. *See the Coping with Stress chapter, starting on page 120, for more information.*

- ◆ Get regular screening tests for colorectal cancer, which is cancer in either the colon or rectum. Colorectal cancer is easy to treat and often curable when found early. The best tool against this disease is screening. Many women fear that the screening tests are embarrassing or painful. But they're not as bad as you might think. *See the Common Screening Tests and Diagnostic Tests Explained on pages 24–25.*
- ◆ If you have GERD, avoid lying down for three hours after a meal. You might also try raising the head of your bed six to eight inches by putting blocks of wood under the bedposts. Just using extra pillows will not help.

#### Then and Now

In 2000, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved two new treatments for chronic (long-term) heartburn. One treatment puts stitches in the muscle between the esophagus and the stomach to help strengthen the muscle, so it does not allow the contents of your stomach to go back up into the esophagus. The other treatment creates tiny cuts on that muscle. When the cuts heal, the scar tissue helps toughen the muscle. The long-term effects of these two new treatments are unknown, but they give hope to people who have severe problems with heartburn.