

# Gastrointestinal Answer Guide

## Improving Digestive Health

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## WHAT IS GI HEALTH



When healthcare providers talk about GI health, they're referring to the health of your digestive system. This includes the organs, tubes, and passageways that process the food you eat and liquids you drink. Your digestive system unlocks the energy and nutrients in food and drink so your body can use them. And it carries waste products out of your body.

Your GI system starts with your digestive tract. This includes your mouth, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine (which includes the colon and rectum), and anus. Your GI system also includes organs that help you digest food: your liver, pancreas, and gallbladder.

The foods you eat and beverages you drink enter your GI system through your mouth. As they make their way through your digestive system, your body digests them, or breaks them down. This allows your body to use the carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients in foods. Your body uses these nutrients for fuel and for important life functions such as growth and repair of cells.

## WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON GI HEALTH PROBLEMS



**Every year, between 60 million and 70 million Americans are affected by some kind of digestive diseases.** Millions more experience minor, temporary discomfort from GI symptoms. GI health problems are a major cause of medical office visits and hospitalizations.

When it comes to GI health problems, reflux tops the list. Reflux occurs in your esophagus, the muscular tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. After you swallow food, it travels down your esophagus and into your stomach. At the lower end of the esophagus is a muscle that opens to allow food to enter the stomach from the esophagus.

Your esophagus can become damaged when digestive juices in the stomach move up into the esophagus—a problem known as gastroesophageal reflux, or just reflux. Over time, people with chronic reflux are at risk for developing a condition known as Barrett's Esophagus. This is a pre-cancerous condition that, if left untreated, can develop into cancer of the esophagus.



# WHAT IS GERD ?



## GERD stands for gastroesophageal reflux disease.

Here's how it happens: To help break down food, your stomach produces digestive juices known as stomach acids. These powerful substances are meant to stay in your stomach. A muscle known as the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) is supposed to keep them there. But sometimes this muscle weakens and allows stomach acids to flow up out of your stomach. When that happens, stomach acids move into your esophagus, which is the tube that carries food and drink from your mouth to your stomach. This process is called gastroesophageal reflux, or GER. It's also referred to as acid reflux or acid regurgitation.

When stomach acid enters your esophagus, you may taste food or an acid-like liquid in the back of your throat. You may feel pain, burning, or discomfort in your chest or upper belly. This burning sensation is known as heartburn or acid indigestion.

Reflux can cause other symptoms as well. They include a chronic cough or sore throat, painful swallowing, hoarseness, asthma-like wheezing, nausea, vomiting, and dental erosion. Be sure to notify your healthcare provider if you have any of these symptoms.

It's not unusual for GER to occur once in a while. But people who have it frequently—several times a week on a regular basis—may develop GERD, which can become a chronic health problem. Over time, stomach acid can cause damage to the esophagus.

Often, lifestyle changes like the ones below can stop reflux. Your healthcare provider may also recommend medicines that can relieve symptoms and protect your esophagus.

## How to Prevent Reflux

### You can help stop acid reflux by taking these steps:

- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Being overweight increases your likelihood of getting reflux.
- **Steer clear of smoke.** People who smoke or live with smokers have more problems with reflux than those who don't. Smoking may relax the LES, which prevents stomach acid from flowing into the esophagus.
- **Have smaller meals.** Avoid eating large meals that leave you with a “stuffed” feeling.
- **Loosen up.** Choose loose-fitting clothes that don't bind you around the belly.
- **Watch what you eat.** Stay away from foods and drinks that bother you, including spicy or minty foods, greasy foods, alcohol, tomato products, and foods that contain caffeine.
- **Avoid eating before bedtime.** Stay upright for at least two to three hours after a meal.
- **Check your medicine chest.** Certain drugs can contribute to reflux, including some kinds of calcium channel blockers, pain medicines, anti-histamines, asthma drugs, and antidepressants. If you think your medications are contributing to reflux, talk with your healthcare provider.

# WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT INTESTINAL HEALTH ?

We take our intestines for granted, and don't think twice about them when they're working well. But when symptoms strike, it can be hard to think of anything else.

Here's a look at some of the most common intestinal problems:

## Constipation

Constipation is a condition in which you have fewer than three bowel movements per week or your stool is dry, hard, or pellet-like. Constipation can cause bloating, abdominal pain, and difficulty passing stools.

Constipation has many causes, including eating a low-fiber diet, being sedentary, being dehydrated, and having certain medical problems. It can also be triggered by a variety of medications, including those used for pain, heart disease, high blood pressure, Parkinson's disease, depression, seizures, muscle problems, and iron deficiency.

Most people have constipation occasionally. However, if you have chronic constipation—constipation that occurs frequently or hangs around for a while—be sure to talk about it with your healthcare provider.

## Diarrhea

Having diarrhea means your stools are loose, watery, and occurring three or more times a day. It may be accompanied by cramps, pain, bloating, nausea, and vomiting. Diarrhea has many causes, including viral or bacterial infections, foodborne illness, and food intolerances or allergies. Sometimes, more serious medical problems cause diarrhea.

Usually, diarrhea clears up on its own in a day or two. If it doesn't, it may be a sign of a more serious GI condition that calls for a visit with a healthcare provider. Parents should call their provider if a baby or child gets diarrhea because it can cause dangerous dehydration.



## Intestinal gas

People like to make jokes about it, but when you have gas, it's no laughing matter. Also known as flatulence, intestinal gas is created during the digestive process. It's normal to pass gas occasionally, but having too much gas can be painful and embarrassing. Usually, you can reduce intestinal gas by avoiding gas-producing foods. Less often, gas can be a symptom of GI diseases such as Crohn's disease.

## Tips for Preventing Constipation

- **Eat smart.** Make sure your diet includes plenty of high-fiber foods, including vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, legumes, and whole grains.
- **Get moving.** Daily exercise helps your bowels work the way they're supposed to.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drinking a couple extra glasses of water each day can make a difference.
- **Check your meds.** Many kinds of drugs and some nutritional supplements can cause constipation. Your healthcare provider can help you determine whether the medicines you take are causing problems.
- **Go light on laxatives.** Over-the-counter drugs can help with occasional constipation, but using them too often can have the opposite effect. Ask your healthcare provider about whether you should use them.

## Foods That Cause Gas

**If gas is giving you a problem, try cutting down on these gas-producing foods:**

- Beans and other legumes.
- Some kinds of vegetables, such as broccoli, onions, cauliflower, cabbage, and carrots.
- If you're lactose-intolerant, foods containing milk and other dairy foods. Choose lactose-free products instead.
- Some fruits, including dried fruits, apples, and pears.
- Foods that contain artificial sweeteners.
- High-fiber foods such as bran cereal. Adding them into your diet too quickly can cause gas flare-ups. Try introducing high-fiber foods gradually—your system will probably adjust after a few days.

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Also known as IBS, irritable bowel syndrome is a group of symptoms rather than a typical disease. A healthcare provider may diagnose it when someone has IBS symptoms at least three times a month for at least three months. Researchers believe that as many as 15% of Americans may have IBS.

People with IBS may have some or all of following symptoms that are not caused by any other known health problem: constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain or cramping, bloating, passing mucous, and changes in bowel habits after eating. Despite the discomfort and inconvenience that these symptoms cause, IBS does not cause damage to the GI tract.

Medical scientists don't fully understand the causes of IBS. But they believe that both physical and emotional issues play a part. Treatment can include medication, diet changes, and mind/body therapy.



## Inflammatory Bowel Disease

In people with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), inflammation in the digestive system can cause symptoms such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, rectal bleeding, weight loss, and anemia (low iron in the blood). Two kinds of IBD are Crohn's Disease and ulcerative colitis, which are caused by abnormal responses by the body's immune system. Symptoms may flare up and then become milder. If you have any IBD symptoms, be sure to let your provider know.

## Diverticular Disease

Diverticular disease causes the formation of very small sacs, known as diverticula, in the walls of the large intestine (colon). Diverticula can be caused by constipation, gas, and other conditions that place pressure on the intestinal walls. When someone's intestines have developed diverticula, they are said to have diverticulosis. When the diverticula become inflamed and infected, the condition is referred to as diverticulitis.

Diverticulosis can cause abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, and rectal bleeding.

# WHAT TESTS ARE USED TO DIAGNOSE GI DISEASES



Healthcare providers use many different tests to find out more about GI conditions. They include:

## Blood tests

## Stool tests

Check for the presence of bacteria, blood, or other findings in bowel movements.

## X-rays

May be used with or without barium, which allows GI problems to show more visibly on scans.

## Ultrasound

Uses sound waves to capture images of internal organs.

## Digital rectal exam

A provider uses a gloved finger to examine the rectum.

## Endoscopy

Allows a provider to use a camera (either through a tube inserted in the mouth or a swallowed capsule) to get a close-up look at the upper GI system.

## Flexible sigmoidoscopy

Uses a flexible tube and a camera inserted through the anus to view part of the colon and the rectum.

## Colonoscopy

Uses a flexible tube and a camera inserted through the anus to view the colon and rectum during both sigmoidoscopy and a colonoscopy, a provider—usually a gastroenterologist—can remove pre-cancerous polyps (small growths) and check for inflammation, damage, and other problems.

## CT colonoscopy (“virtual colonoscopy”)

Uses CT scanning to check the health of the colon and rectum; requires follow-up with a colonoscopy if polyps are found, because removing polyps can prevent cancer from forming.

## Should You Have a Colonoscopy?

Some 150,000 cases of cancer of the colon or rectum (known as colorectal cancer) are diagnosed in the U.S. each year. It is the third most common kind of cancer. One of the best ways to protect yourself from colorectal cancer is through screening tests that find cancer and pre-cancer early.

Although your healthcare provider will explain what tests you need, the American Cancer Society recommends colonoscopy and other screening tests starting at age 50 for men and women with an average risk of developing colorectal cancer. Testing is often started earlier for people with family history of colorectal cancer or other risk factors.

## HOW DO MY LIFESTYLE CHOICES AFFECT MY GI HEALTH



The decisions you make every day about how you live can have a big impact on your GI health. For example:

**Exercise** is excellent for your GI system. It helps keep your bowels functioning properly, increases blood flow to digestive organs, aids you in weight control, and improves your overall health. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week.

**Smoking** raises your risk of a range of GI diseases, including cancer (of the mouth, esophagus, stomach, pancreas, liver, colon, and rectum), GERD, inflammatory bowel disease, and liver disease. Quit smoking now and you'll start to reverse some of the damage that's been done to your GI system. Avoid secondhand smoke, too.

**Stress-reduction techniques** may help reduce GI symptoms in some cases. Stress isn't thought to cause GI diseases, but it can aggravate symptoms, perhaps by making the nerves in your GI system more sensitive. You can learn to relax through meditation, counseling, hypnosis, or other stress-reduction techniques.

