

The Digestive System

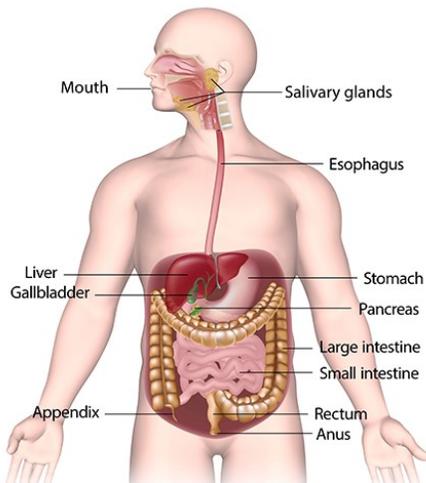


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Medicines & Digestion

Prescription and over-the-counter medications can affect your digestion. Antihistamines, iron and narcotic pain killers (opioids) can cause constipation. Taking too many laxatives can also have the surprising effect of constipating you. Some medicines like antidepressants can cause constipation or diarrhea; medicines affect people differently.

Other medicines that may cause diarrhea are antibiotics, proton pump inhibitors (omeprazole) and chemotherapy drugs.

Regular use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, celecoxib) can contribute to heartburn.

Turning Food Into Energy
Keeping Your Digestive System Healthy

Do you ever wonder how the blueberries or chicken you eat get broken down into fuel for the body? The digestive system is made up of organs that each have different roles in processing proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and liquids. Each organ works to break food into smaller parts and move nutrients to where they can be absorbed. Spoiler: the next section describes the digestion process; skip if you don't want the details!

The Digestion Process

Digestion starts when you put food in your mouth. It immediately mixes with saliva which has an enzyme that breaks down starches. Once food has been chewed, your tongue pushes it into the throat, which leads to the esophagus. The brain signals the muscles of the esophagus to push the food downward into the stomach. The muscle of the stomach mixes food and liquid with stomach acids.

From the stomach, food moves into the small intestine. Digestive juices produced by the pancreas are secreted into the small intestine to break down protein, fats and carbohydrates. The liver produces another digestive juice called bile that helps digest fats and vitamins. Helpful bacteria also do their part to process carbohydrates.

The walls of the small intestine absorb digested nutrients to give us energy and allow for growth and

cell repair. The liver plays an important role by using the raw materials absorbed by the small intestine and triggers the release of chemicals the body needs to function.

What enters the small intestine is semi-solid and what comes out of this 22-foot organ is liquid. The leftover (waste) liquid enters the large intestine or colon, a 6-foot tube that connects to the rectum. As the liquid moves through the large intestine, water is removed and a stool is formed, which is excreted from the body through the rectum and anus.

Keeping It Healthy

Even if you'd rather not have a mental image of how food moves through your body, you may wonder what you can do to keep things moving well without discomfort! Experiencing stomach upset, heartburn, constipation, diarrhea and gas occasionally is normal. But when they happen often, your life can be affected, in a bad way.

Diet and lifestyle habits are key to a healthy digestive tract. First the bad news: foods high in carbohydrates, saturated fats and additives are linked to an increased risk of developing digestive problems ranging from bloating and heartburn to ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). But the good news is that if you eat a healthy diet of "real food" and avoid processed foods, you can improve your diges-

Burps, Gas and Bloating

A 7-year old's favorite topics can be burping and passing gas! But having to burp or pass gas at the wrong time can be embarrassing. You can reduce burping and feeling bloated by eating and drinking slowly, avoiding carbonated beverages, and skipping gum and hard candies (allows more air in through your mouth). To relieve symptoms of bloating, avoid or limit broccoli, baked beans, cabbage and cauliflower.

Passing gas is normal; it's a sign that bacteria in the bowel are helping with digestion. If it happens more than about 18-20 times a day or is a concern, try limiting the vegetables listed above; dairy products (ask your provider if you could be lactose-intolerant); and starches like wheat, oats, corn and potatoes. Rice is less gas-producing.

The information contained in this newsletter is for general, educational purposes. It should not be considered a replacement for consultation with your healthcare provider. If you have concerns about your health, please contact your healthcare provider.

tion. Pick whole foods like vegetables (legumes are veggies too!), fruits, nuts, fish and chicken. Avoid packaged food which tends to have highly processed ingredients, unhealthy fats and excess salt. Try eating and drinking mindfully — chewing slowly and enjoying each bite and sip. Pay attention to when you are hungry, and when you are full. Overeating can make you feel bloated and sluggish because the digestive system is overloaded. Under-eating can cause nausea and malnutrition.

While some medical conditions require that you limit high-fiber foods, most people need fiber in their diets for good digestion. Soluble and insoluble fiber keep things moving along. The soluble fiber in oatmeal, legumes, apples, citrus, nuts and seeds help add bulk to your stool. Insoluble fiber in carrots, cauliflower, legumes, potatoes and whole grains act like a broom to move waste through the digestive tract. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) have found that people who eat a high-fiber diet have a reduced risk for developing ulcers, reflux, hemorrhoids, diverticulitis and IBS.

If you suffer from constipation, you may not be drinking enough fluids. Experts recommend drinking 50 to 66 ounces of non-caffeinated fluids a day. If your water bottle holds 12 oz, then you need to drink and refill it 4-6 times a day, maybe more if you work outside in warmer climates or are exercising vigorously. You can count herbal teas and flavored seltzer water towards the goal. Vegetables and fruits that are high in water, such as cucumber, zucchini, celery, tomatoes, melons, peaches, and strawberries, can help meet the daily requirement too. Caffeinated coffee, tea and sodas count against the goal because caffeine causes fluid to be drawn out of the body. While fruit juices and other drinks are technically fluids, they aren't always the best option because of the added sugar. Even natural sugar

from concentrated juices can add up in the calorie department.

Stress, that thing that motivates us to get stuff done, can also affect digestion. Experiencing regular stress sends signals to the brain and diverts blood and energy away from the digestive system. Chronic stress is associated with stomach ulcers, IBS, diarrhea and constipation. There are many techniques for managing stress. Pick one or more that work for you, such as meditation, relaxation training, yoga, talk therapy, acupuncture and exercise.

Speaking of exercise, it is one of the best ways to improve digestion. Besides helping to relieve stress, anxiety and depression, it can speed up digestion. One NIH study showed that cycling, jogging or other moderate exercise increased gut "travel time" by almost 30%. Other studies showed that 30 minutes of daily exercise (including walking) can lessen constipation and reduce inflammation associated with IBS.

Some habits just aren't great for your overall health, but they specifically wreak havoc with digestion. Smoking and drinking alcohol increase the risk of developing acid reflux and other digestive issues. Eating late at night and then lying down often leads to heartburn. Our bodies need time to digest what we eat and staying upright keeps food moving in the right direction. Try to allow 3 hours after eating before lying down.

Be sure to mention any digestion concerns you have to your provider. If you have severe abdominal pain, blood in the stool or vomit that looks like coffee grounds, seek medical attention right away. KnovaSolutions can provide detailed information about digestive concerns, including how to manage chronic conditions. We'll also help you adopt healthy lifestyle habits. Call us at **800/355-0885**, Monday to Friday, 8 am-8 pm, Mountain Time.