The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ120
WOMEN'S HEALTH

Problems of the Digestive System

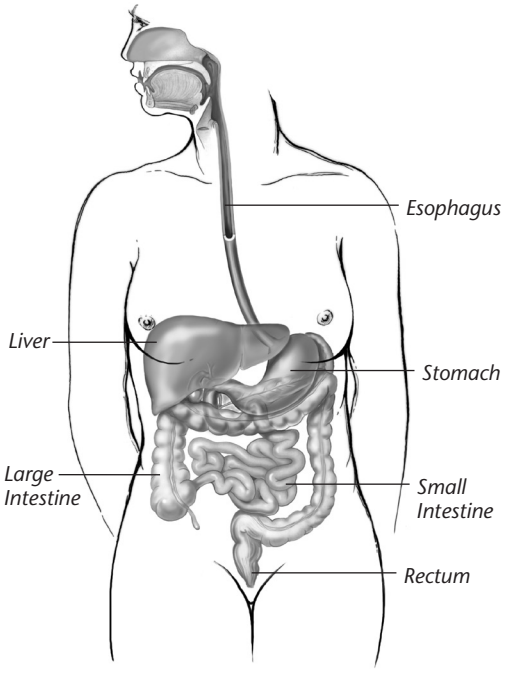
What is the digestive system?

The digestive system is a series of hollow organs joined in a long–looping tube. It includes the mouth, ***esophagus***, stomach, intestines (bowels), ***rectum***, and ***anus***. It also includes solid organs—the liver, gallbladder, and ***pancreas***.

What are some common problems that affect the digestive system?

Some common problems of the digestive system include the following:

- Constipation
- Diarrhea



The digestive system breaks down foods that you eat and lets your body absorb nutrients.

- Heartburn
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Hemorrhoids
- Gas

When should I see my doctor about a digestive problem?

Most of the digestive conditions discussed in this FAQ usually are not serious and are easy to control with lifestyle changes and medication. But, in some cases, these problems can be a sign of more serious medical problems, such as ***peptic ulcer disease***, ***Crohn disease***, and colorectal cancer. If symptoms persist or get worse, see your doctor.

What is constipation?

Constipation involves having infrequent bowel movements that also may be painful. Listed are signs and symptoms of constipation:

- Fewer than three bowel movements a week
- Stools that are firm or hard to pass
- Swelling or bloating of the abdomen
- Straining during bowel movements
- Feeling full even after a bowel movement

How can I prevent constipation?

You can help prevent constipation by

- drinking plenty of fluids—eight glasses of water a day
- eating a diet that is high in fiber
- exercising
- not holding your stool—using the bathroom when you feel the urge to have a bowel movement
- working with your doctor to adjust any medications you may be taking

When should I use a laxative?

If constipation continues, your doctor may suggest use of a ***laxative***. Most of these products are available without a prescription. Laxatives should be used with caution. You should stop using these products once your bowel movements become regular again. Overuse of stimulants can cause your bowels to depend on them.

If constipation does not go away after trying these remedies, see your doctor. There may be other problems that are causing constipation.

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is having three or more loose bowel movements a day. It also may involve cramping.

What can cause diarrhea?

Several things can cause diarrhea:

- Eating spoiled, undercooked, or raw food that may contain harmful bacteria or viruses
- Drinking or eating foods that contain bacteria your body is not used to (when traveling to foreign countries, for instance)
- Consuming dairy products (if you are ***lactose intolerant***), caffeine, artificial sweeteners, or certain additives
- Taking medications, especially antibiotics
- Digestive diseases, such as irritable bowel syndrome

What can I do if I have diarrhea?

If you have diarrhea, drink plenty of fluids to regain those that are lost. If diarrhea does not go away in a few hours, drink fluids and liquid foods that contain salt, such as sports drinks or broth. Ask your doctor or pharmacist which product to use. Avoid drinking dairy products, soda, and juices. They may contain lactose, caffeine, or sugar, which may make diarrhea worse.

If diarrhea lasts more than 24 hours, see your doctor right away. Also see your doctor if you have diarrhea with bloody stools, fever, or severe abdominal pain. You may have an infection or some other problem that may need to be treated.

What is irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)?

IBS mainly affects women between the ages of 30 years and 50 years. The symptoms can come and go over time. For some people, it is only mildly annoying. For others, it can be serious.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

The following symptoms may be indicative of IBS:

- Cramps
- Gas
- Bloating
- Changes in bowel habits—constipation, diarrhea, or both
- An urge to have a bowel movement that does not happen
- Stools that have mucus in them

What can trigger IBS symptoms?

Stress, eating large meals, or travel may trigger the symptoms. Certain medicines or foods also can cause symptoms to flare up. Caffeine, dairy products, and large amounts of alcohol can cause problems, too. Women may have more symptoms during their menstrual periods.

How is IBS treated?

Irritable bowel syndrome cannot be cured, but it can be managed to reduce the symptoms. Keep a record of foods you eat and symptoms you have. A record can help you pinpoint which foods cause problems.

Your doctor or a dietitian can suggest changes in your diet to help manage IBS. Eating frequent small meals rather than two or three large meals a day can help. In some cases, adding fiber to your diet may help. Your doctor also may suggest medications or lifestyle changes to relieve the symptoms.

What is heartburn?

With heartburn, a muscle in your esophagus that opens and closes when you swallow may not work properly. Sometimes it does not close tightly or fast enough and the food and stomach fluids back up into your esophagus. This may cause a burning feeling in your chest and throat, called heartburn.

This condition is very common. It usually is not serious. Sometimes, it may become bothersome, especially when lying down. It occurs more often during pregnancy.

Can heartburn be controlled?

You can control or even prevent heartburn by taking these steps:

- Elevate the head of the bed
- Eat small, more frequent meals
- Avoid smoking and alcohol
- Avoid foods that bother you
- Avoid lying on your back right after eating

Your doctor may suggest that you take an over-the-counter medication. If both medication and lifestyle changes fail to bring relief, you may need a more detailed follow-up.

What are hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids are swollen blood vessels in and around the anus and lower rectum. The vessels stretch under pressure. They can become painful, itchy, and irritated. This might happen if you are straining to have bowel movements. Passing stool may injure the hemorrhoids and cause them to bleed.

What causes hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids can result from several factors:

- Being overweight
- Pregnancy
- Standing or sitting for long periods
- Straining during physical labor
- Constipation

How can I prevent or relieve hemorrhoids?

Adding fiber and fluids to your diet can help prevent hemorrhoids. The symptoms of hemorrhoids can be relieved with ice packs to reduce swelling. You also may use a hemorrhoid cream or suppositories. If problems persist, contact your doctor. In more severe cases, minor surgery may be needed to remove hemorrhoids.

How can I reduce gas?

Foods that are hard to digest can remain in the large intestine and cause gas. Gas affects many people who are lactose intolerant. It also affects people who have trouble digesting vegetables, such as beans, cabbage, or broccoli. You can prevent gas in your diet by figuring out which foods give you gas and removing them from your diet. Your doctor also may recommend an over-the-counter treatment that helps reduce gas.

What is colorectal cancer?

Colon and rectal cancer—or colorectal cancer—affects the large intestine and rectum. It is the third leading cause of cancer death among women in the United States.

In most cases, colorectal cancer develops slowly over time. This type of cancer often begins as a polyp—a tissue growth in the colon or rectum.

How is colorectal cancer detected?

Routine screening can help detect colorectal cancer early enough to be treated. The preferred screening method is a ***colonoscopy*** performed every 10 years beginning at age 50 years. Some people need to be screened before age 50 years, including African Americans, who should begin screening at age 45 years.

In addition to colonoscopy, there are other screening methods that also can be used. The type of screening test and when to have it varies based on your risk factors. Talk with your doctor about which screening test is right for you.

What are the symptoms of colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer usually shows no signs in the early stages of the disease. In the more advanced stages, signs and symptoms include:

- A change in bowel habits
- Bleeding from the rectum
- Blood in the stool
- Stools that are more narrow than usual
- Abdominal discomfort (bloating, cramps, or frequent gas pains)
- A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement (that does not go away after a bowel movement)
- Loss of appetite
- Weakness and feeling tired

Having these symptoms does not mean you have cancer. The same symptoms can result from other, less severe problems. Talk to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

Glossary

Anus: A hollow organ that connects the large intestine to the outside of the body.

Colonoscopy: An exam of the entire colon using a small, lighted instrument.

Crohn Disease: An inflammation of the digestive system.

Esophagus: A tube that connects the mouth with the stomach.

Lactose Intolerant: Being unable to digest dairy products.

Laxative: A product that is used to empty the bowels.

Pancreas: A gland that produces digestive fluids.

Peptic Ulcer Disease: A series of symptoms caused by erosion in the lining of the stomach or duodenum.

Rectum: The final part of the large intestine that connects to the anus.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ120: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.