

# Health tip: Understanding digestive health

## Why is digestive health important?<sup>1</sup>

Digestion is imperative to life; it is the process of breaking down food so nutrients and energy can be distributed throughout the body. Each of our digestive tract organs have an important role. When one of them is “out of sync”, GI discomfort may occur.

## Factors that may impact digestive health:<sup>2</sup>

- **Diet:** sugar and western food may trigger symptoms, and food additives such as aspartame and saccharin may cause disruption.
- **Medications:** many medications may affect our digestive health and antibiotics may alter the normal flora causing diarrhea.
- **Smoking:** smoking may cause intestinal inflammation and affect the normal flora.
- **Stress:** your brain and gut share a communication pathway, and stress may cause a disruption in that communication.
- **Home environment:** pets and farm animals may have a positive affect on your gut health.

## Diagnosed conditions include:

- **Constipation:** Having fewer than 3 bowel movements per week. May be caused by poor diet, medication, blockages, and lifestyle imbalances. Treatment may include increased fiber and water intake, exercise, and medications.<sup>5</sup>
- **Food Intolerances:** Difficulty digesting food. May be caused by gluten, MSG, and lactose which are most common. Treatment includes avoiding offenders and eating smaller servings.<sup>3</sup>
- **Heartburn or GERD:** The backflow of stomach acid from stomach into the esophagus. May be caused by obesity, family history, excessive smoking or alcohol, and certain foods.<sup>4</sup>



## Digestive condition symptoms include:<sup>2</sup>

- Difficulty swallowing
- Heartburn
- Indigestion
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Gas, belching, and bloating
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea and/or constipation
- Bleeding
- Weight loss

- **Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS):** Occurs when the intestines are not functioning properly. Causes may include stress, family history, and food intolerances. Treatment may include self-care, increasing fiber and water, exercise, and managing stress.<sup>7</sup>
- **Celiac disease:** Difficulty digesting gluten. Caused by an immune system disorder in which the cause is unknown. Treatment includes following a gluten-free diet.<sup>6</sup>
- **Crohn's Disease:** Inflammatory bowel disease. Risks include age, ethnicity, smoking, heredity, and immune system triggers. Treatment includes medication therapy, nutrition, and smoking cessation.<sup>8</sup>



### Simple ways to improve digestion:<sup>1</sup>

- Eat moderate portion sizes
- Eat in the morning
- Eat at regular intervals
- Relax while you eat
- Sit up when you eat



### Foods that may improve digestion:<sup>10</sup>

- **Fibrous:** Whole grains (oatmeal & brown rice), root vegetables (sweet potatoes and carrots), and green vegetables (broccoli and green beans)
- **Probiotic rich foods:** Fermented foods (yogurt, pickles, and sauerkraut)
- **Alkaline foods:** Bananas, melons, cauliflower, and nuts
- **Hydrating foods:** Celery, cucumber, watermelon, and broth-based soups
- **Others:** Ginger, lemon water with honey, and herbal tea

## Certain foods and drinks can trigger heartburn in some people, including:

- Spicy foods
- Onions
- Citrus products
- Tomato products, such as ketchup
- Fatty or fried foods
- Peppermint
- Chocolate
- Alcohol, carbonated beverages, coffee, or other caffeinated beverages
- Large or fatty meals



#### Sources:

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