

Is your lifestyle making you sick?

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Digestion and your health

While digestion and all its functions may be impolite to talk about, your good health depends on it. It's easy to take digestion for granted, but when you are experiencing digestive problems, it's hard to focus on anything else. The digestive system breaks down food to provide fuel and nutrients to be absorbed into your body. This allows your cells to repair and regenerate themselves while maintaining and supporting all the functions that keep the body working. Your lifestyle has a major role to play in determining digestive health. Some of the lifestyle behaviours and habits that can compromise your digestive health include:

- lack of sleep;
- emotional or physical stress;
- illness, or impaired immune function;
- medications, especially antibiotics.

If these characteristics of a modern, busy lifestyle continue for an extended period (or if a combination of factors is present at the same time), they can trigger or worsen existing digestive problems.

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Diet and your digestive health

When you're rushed, busy or stressed, it might seem hard to find the time to prepare nourishing meals, or savour your food and chew it thoroughly. But resorting to fast, processed foods forces your digestive system to work harder to extract whatever nutrients it can. The dietary factors that cause the most digestive stress include:

- extreme diets that contain either too much, or too little fat, carbohydrate or protein
- processed foods high in sugar, salt, and fats that are low in fibre and nutrients
- fast eating or overeating, where your body has to process a lot of food at once
- too much caffeine or alcohol, which overloads your digestive system

To minimise the workload on your digestive system, try to include more natural, unprocessed foods in your diet. Eating fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains can also help to compensate for factors that have a negative effect on your digestion.

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Common digestive problems

Digestive complaint	Common causes	Treatment advice
Constipation	A diet low in fibre and water	Exercise, eat more fibre, avoid regular use of laxatives
Gastritis and Ulcers	Infection with the Helicobacter pylori bacteria, or diseases and drugs irritate and inflame the lining of your stomach (gastritis) or cause sores or holes (ulcers).	Medication and lifestyle changes
Diarrhoea	Illness or food poisoning.	Usually goes away over time without treatment.
Flatulence	Excessive flatulence can be caused by eating fast, and eating certain foods.	Eat slowly, cut back on soft drinks, and eliminate sugar substitutes.
Irritable bowel syndrome	Uncertain, but possibly triggered by stress or gastric infection.	No cure, but symptoms may be treated with medication, changing diet, and reducing stress.
Indigestion, reflux and heartburn	Excess stomach acid from large meals, spicy foods, stress, pressure on your stomach from obesity or pregnancy, or from a weakness in the valve between the stomach and oesophagus.	Lifestyle changes, antacids or medication.

Celiac disease	The body has difficulty digesting gluten.	Follow a gluten-free diet by cutting out foods made from wheat, rye, and barley and certain other foods.
Inflammatory bowel disease	Chronic inflammation of the rectum and large intestine (ulcerative colitis) or the whole gastrointestinal tract (Crohn's disease).	Medication, intravenous feeding may be required in some circumstances.

For more information, see our section on [Digestive Conditions »](#)

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When to see your doctor

Most people will experience a digestive problem at some point in time. Mild conditions such as indigestion or diarrhoea are easier to treat, while others are debilitating, such as stomach ulcers, and may require attention from a gastroenterologist. Some common signs that your digestive system needs medical attention include:

- vomiting, or blood in vomit;
- loss of appetite or weight;
- blood in your stools, or bloody diarrhoea;
- abdominal pain or severe bloating;
- chronic heartburn or indigestion.