How the Stomach Works

The stomach is the first digestive organ in the process of receiving food after swallowing. Once it arrives in the stomach, stomach acid (hydrochloric acid) and pepsin break food down so your body can derive nourishment from it. The muscles in the stomach walls create a rippling motion mixing the food, and juices made from glands in the lining of the stomach help to digest the food. After approximately 1 to 3 hours, the food becomes liquid and moves into the small intestine for absorption. This normal digestive process may become disrupted with what we often refer to as indigestion, also known as upset stomach, and is often felt in the upper abdomen.

Millions experience digestive system health problems

There are very few who do not experience mild to severe digestive problems in the course of a lifetime. These can be acute or chronic, and could include heartburn, indigestion, acid reflux, ulcers, bloating, nausea, gas, sour stomach, hyperacidity and others. All told, 60 to 70 million people are affected by digestive discomfort or diseases nationally, and for many it impacts the quality of life.

Additional stomach conditions not related to digestive issues include nausea from viral or bacterial sources, ulcers, gastritis, stomach cancer, and stomach polyps. While these can cause pain and stomach upset, they are not impacted by products that facilitate the digestive process.

Most people take their stomachs for granted. Stomachs work to digest food and help distribute nutrients, but only get any attention when they hurt or get upset. At that point, relieving the pain and indigestion takes on a sense of urgency. The most common causes of indigestion are overeating, fatty and deep-fried foods, chocolate, citrus, tomato products, alcohol, caffeine, smoking, eating on the go, certain medications, junk food and fast food, ice cold beverages, carbonation, exercising with a full stomach, stress, excess weight, and eating before going to bed.

The impact of digestive disorders

Digestive disorders account for 50 million physician office visits each year at a cost of more than $107 billion — $87 billion in direct medical costs and $20 billion in indirect costs. This means people with digestive disorders have less quality time with their families, and more missed work and lost pay. Additionally, over 7 percent of the U.S. population has reflux or esophageal disorders, resulting in over 5 million visits to the doctor every year.

Indigestion and heartburn

Indigestion, also called dyspepsia, is often a burning feeling in the upper abdomen, while heartburn is a burning sensation in the chest. Despite the name, it really doesn’t affect the heart. It is a result of stomach acid rising into the esophagus and causing discomfort. Dyspepsia affects as much as twenty-five percent of the adult population in the U.S. Most often it is the result of eating too much, eating too quickly, eating high-fat foods, or eating during stressful situations. You may be experiencing discomfort in the upper abdomen, belching and loud intestinal sounds, nausea, constipation, poor appetite, diarrhea, and flatulence. The symptoms of indigestion and/or heartburn resemble other more serious conditions or concerns, so consider consulting with your physician for a proper diagnosis.

When suffering from digestive complaints, many reach for expensive prescription pharmaceuticals or over-the-counter antacids or acid-blockers. These drugs may provide temporary relief of the symptoms, but they do nothing to address the
underlying causes. In fact most of these drugs hinder normal digestion by neutralizing or blocking stomach acid. They can also interfere with the absorption of vitamins, minerals, nutrients and certain medications.

The digestive system usually performs quite well and we don’t even have to think about it – we just eat. When there are problems in the stomach, there are signs that let us know there is a problem. When you get digestive warning signs, recognize them immediately and do something about it. Be sure to make healthy food choices, chew food well before swallowing, manage any stress, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep.

About GERD

Gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) does not close properly and the stomach contents leak back, or reflux, into the esophagus. The LES is a ring of muscle at the bottom of the esophagus that acts like a valve between the esophagus and stomach. The esophagus carries food from the mouth to the stomach. Certain foods and drinks, including chocolate, alcohol, onions, garlic, and peppermint may weaken or relax the LES. When refluxed stomach acid touches the lining of the esophagus, it causes a burning sensation in the chest or throat called heartburn. The fluid may even be tasted in the back of the mouth, and this is called acid indigestion. Occasional heartburn is common, but does not necessarily mean one has GERD. Heartburn which occurs more than twice weekly should be checked by your physician.

The main symptoms of GERD are persistent heartburn and acid regurgitation, even while sleeping. Some people have GERD without heartburn. Instead, they experience pain in the chest, hoarseness in the morning, wheezing, or trouble swallowing. Some may feel like food is stuck in the throat or like they are choking or their throat is tight, have a dry cough and bad breath. GERD is often caused by a hiatus, or hiatal hernia.

Other factors that may contribute to GERD include alcohol use, being overweight, pregnancy, and smoking. Also, certain foods can be associated with reflux events, including citrus fruits, chocolate, drinks with caffeine, dairy products, fatty and fried foods, garlic and onions, mint flavorings, bell peppers, spicy foods and tomato-based foods (spaghetti sauce, chili, pizza, etc.).

Misconceptions about digestive health

Researchers have recently begun to understand many diseases that affect the digestive system. Two common misconceptions are that smoking and drinking milk help relieve heartburn. Actually, cigarette smoking and dairy contribute to heartburn. Heartburn occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) — a muscle between the esophagus and stomach — relaxes, allowing the acidic contents of the stomach to splash back into the esophagus. Cigarette smoking causes the LES to relax, which always facilitates this condition. Milk is one of several dairy products, including some cheeses and cottage cheese, that can trigger heartburn.

Lifestyle suggestions to help with digestive health

There are a number of Lifestyle changes that may help digestive health.

• Stop smoking — this may reduce or eliminate problems with digestive health
• Reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption
• Lose weight if needed
• Eat smaller meals
• Wear loose-fitting clothes
• Avoid lying down until at least 3 hours after a meal
• Consider raising the head of your bed 6-8 inches so you are not lying flat
• Try placing a hot water bottle on your stomach
• Relax by taking a warm bath or lying down listening to soft music — whatever you can do to reduce stress

Symptoms of indigestion may resemble other conditions or concerns, so please consult your health professional for proper diagnosis.
Those with a sensitive digestive system might benefit from eliminating spicy foods that are more difficult to digest. Select and serve foods that are well-cooked, boiled in filtered water and seasoned with salt. Boiling and poaching foods make them tender, break down more quickly, and digest faster. Eat smaller, more frequent meals so there is less work for the stomach and digestive system to do.

Diet and Nutrition choices for stomach comfort
There are many safe and natural remedies to calm an upset stomach. The next time you feel the onset of an upset stomach try the following:

- Drink a small glass of water at room temperature with a little lemon juice.
- Enjoy stomach friendly foods such as papaya, peaches, figs, bananas, salmon, avocado, cherries and cantaloupe.
- Add a few sprigs of fresh parsley or a teaspoon of dried parsley to a glass of warm water, and sip.
- Eat fresh ginger or drink a glass of ginger tea or ginger ale.
- Drink chamomile, catnip or fennel tea.

References
2. Natural Marketing Institute’s (NMI) Health & Wellness Trends Database.
6. Celiac Disease Foundation.
7. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
8. Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation.
9. Hepatitis Foundation.
12. National Center of Infectious Diseases, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

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