



Help for Stomach Disorders

Do you suffer from some kind of gastrointestinal (GI) problem, such as stomach upset or diarrhea? It's not fun to talk about this subject, but it's even worse to deal with it! Not only can GI disorders wreak havoc on the digestive tract, but they can also get in the way of your exercise programs, meal plans and social interactions. However, by making the right nutritional choices, you can begin to take back your life.

Here is a brief introduction to the most common GI conditions, along with nutritional recommendations for handling them from Natalie Digate Muth, MPH, RD, a registered dietitian, medical student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and master trainer for the American Council on Exercise.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

The most prevalent GI disorder is irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which causes abdominal pain, bloating, discomfort and changes in the frequency and consistency of bowel movements. Symptoms often worsen after you have eaten large meals, become emotionally upset or ingested milk products, chocolate, alcohol, caffeine, carbonated drinks or fatty foods.

High-fiber foods like broccoli, apples and whole-grain breads can actually alleviate some of the symptoms of IBS by

softening the stool and relieving constipation. Also, research suggests that **probiotics**—the live microbial organisms found in certain foodstuffs such as yogurt—may help. Minimizing stress through regular exercise can also help.

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (also known as heartburn) causes pain from stomach acids being pushed up into the esophagus owing to relaxation of the sphincter that separates the esophagus from the highly acidic stomach contents. Typically, smoking, alcohol, coffee, chocolate, citrus fruits and fatty foods exacerbate heartburn. If you have GERD, you should avoid alcohol, coffee, chocolate, citrus fruits and fatty foods. Engaging in regular exercise is also recommended, especially if you are overweight or obese.

Lactose Intolerance

Lactose intolerance comes when your body doesn't properly break down foods that contain lactose, a sugar found mostly in many dairy products. When this sugar is not properly broken down, water is drawn into the intestinal lumen, which leads to watery diarrhea.

Lactose intolerant? Don't avoid dairy products completely if you rely on them for your main source of calcium. Consume small amounts of them up to the point at which symptoms would appear (this is usually equivalent to about 8–12 ounces of milk). A calcium supplement or lactose-reduced milk can help. You can also eat yogurt with live cultures, because it contains bacteria-derived lactase, which tends not to cause the usual symptoms of the condition. ■



Tips for Promoting Good Digestive Health

Follow these simple steps to prevent common digestive ailments:

- 1. Eat More Fiber.** Consume 20–35 grams (g) per day to prevent constipation, diarrhea and symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Good sources of fiber include fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains.
- 2. Make Good Food Choices.** Avoid junk food and snacks that are high in fats, sugars and refined carbohydrates. These types of foods are difficult for your body to digest in large quantities and can cause heartburn, bloating and constipation.
- 3. Drink Lots of Fluids.** Fluids aid mineral and vitamin absorption and help foods move comfortably through the digestive tract. Drinking 9–13 cups (75–100 ounces) of fluid a day can also ease constipation.
- 4. Eat Moderate Portions.** Pay attention to portion size. Eat more often, but less at each sitting. Smaller meals are digested more easily.
- 5. Control Your Stress Levels.** Stress can decrease the release of digestive enzymes and divert blood and oxygen from the digestive system to other parts of the body, leading to heartburn, bloating and constipation.
- 6. Don't Eat Right Before Going to Sleep.** Studies have found that acid reflux sufferers who go to bed within 3 hours of eating are seven times more likely to experience reflux symptoms than those who eat earlier.

COURTESY OF

Coach Ken Johnson
coachken@3-fitness.com
www.3-fitness.com

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